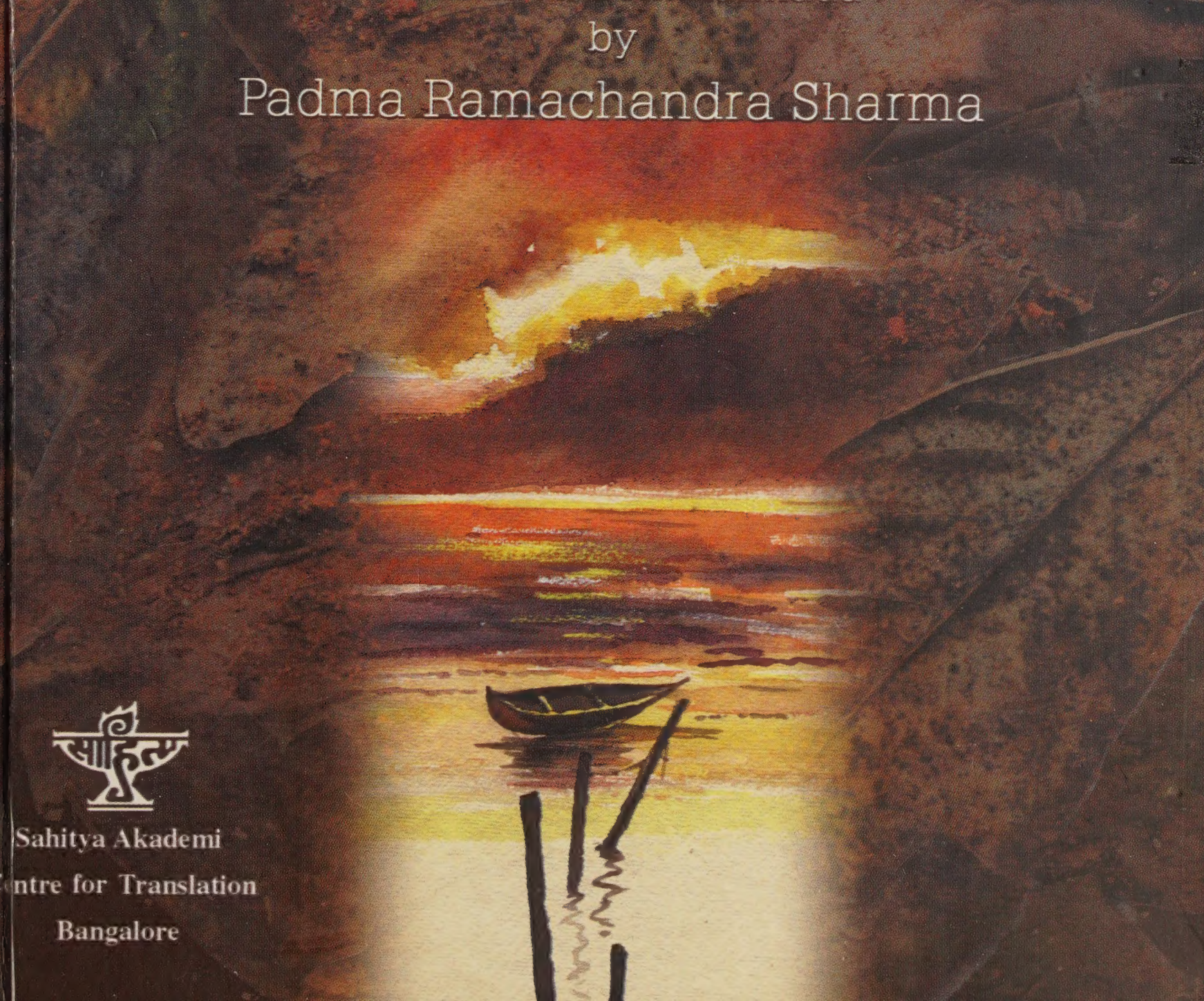
SHIVARAMA KARANTH

RETURN TO EARTH

(Marali Mannigé)

Translated from Kannada
by
Padma Ramachandra Sharma



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Return to earth : English translation by Padma Ramachandra Sharma of K. Shivarama Karanth's Kannada novel *Marali Mannigé*, Sahitya Akademi, 2002, Rs. 200

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Publisher's Note

Sahitya Akademi, the Indian National Academy of Letters, has been, since its very inception, at the hub of translation activity in the country. The Akademi has so far published about three thousand books, the majority of which are translations of contemporary masterpieces of Indian literature in twenty-two Indian languages recognised by the Akademi, including English.

The establishment of the Akademi's Centres for Translation, we hope, is the latest proof of our deep and abiding commitment to translation; they are meant for national and international dialogues on translation and the publications of translations in Indian as well as foreign languages, of ancient, medieval, pre-modern and modern Indian classics besides perceptive foreign books on Indian culture and literature.

Translation has always been central to Indian literature. Translations and adaptations of our epics, especially the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been fundamental to the various literatures of India; in fact many of our languages came into being with these translations or adapations. Even the distinction between an original work and translation was rather blurred and uncertain in India's pre-colonial discourse. The *Ramayana* in different languages for example, were taken to be original and brilliant manifestations of the genius of the respective languages. The story of Indian literature until the ninenteeth century was mostly a story of creative translations, adaptations, retellings, interpretations, epitomes and elaborations of classical texts. These knit together communities, languages, religions and cultures. The translation during the days of British occupation, though dictated by the colonial ideology of selective appropriations and cautious canonisation,

also kept the process alive. Sahitya Akademi's attempts have been to restore the pre-colonial openness of the activity even while relating it and rendering it relevant to our post-colonial context which has made the problematique of translation a site for raising questions of representation, power and historicity. We are fully aware of the pitfalls of the colonial enterprise that attempted to produce a colonial form of subjectivity through technologies and practices of power/knowledge. Our attempt is to overcome the asymmetrical relations of power that operated in the colonised era and turned translation into a strategy of containment and reinforcement of the hegemonic versions of the colonised as subjects without history. Translation to us is a way of retrieving our people's histories and recording their past and present.

We know too that the practice of translation in post-colonial contexts has given form not only to discourses of domination but also of resistance. It is necessary, we believe, to relocate the theory and practice of translation within hitherto unexplored, Eastern, cultural contexts. Translation activity needs to be examined as policy, prioritisation, empowerment and culture learning within post-colonial contexts since cross-cultural relations are constituted not on an abstract transcultural universal of beauty, but on immediate encounters with other cultural systems.

Translation is also a celebration of difference and a reinventing of cultural identities. It reframes the boundaries of the sayable and changes the terms of affiliation. Still at the root of all translations there seems to be nostalgia for a lost common language or the dream of an ideal language the whole of humankind can share. Translation can be looked upon as a festival of the ultimate unity of the human being. We have pitched our tent at the fulcrum of this dialectic.

K. SATCHIDANANDAN
Secretary, Sahitya Akademi

Foreword

There was but one way in which the Centre for Translation, Sahitya Akademi could have paid its dues to the colossal Shivarama Karanth in this centenary year of his birth. And we are happy to place in your hands this translation of ***Marali Mannigé***, Karanth's celebrated classic. ***Marali Mannigé*** is one of his most translated novels; it has been translated into ten Indian languages: Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Konkani, Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Maithili and Marathi, besides English. Prof. A.N. Murthy Rao's translation of 1955, titled 'The Return to the Soil', is an abridged English version which has reduced the novel to two-thirds its original length. Such a translation practice is unthinkable in these post-colonial times. Further, ***Marali Mannigé*** is one of those works that each generation has to discover for itself anew. Hence this fuller translation which we hope will fulfil the expectations of a contemporary readership.

Marali Mannigé, a 'regional novel' in the many senses of the term, documents the social history of rural, coastal Karnataka on a vast canvas ranging from 1850 to 1940. Karanth's commitment to the region is manifest in his use of the Dakshina Kannada dialect which renders his narrative authentic. It is for this reason that Karanth provided a glossary of over 330 words, from the Dakshina Kannada dialect to Standard Kannada, when the novel was first published in 1941. Since Karnataka was not unified as one linguistic state until 1956, and Kannada was still in the process of standardisation, he must have felt the need to provide a glossary to his readers. However, translating the text for a non-Kannada, but English-knowing, post-Rushdie generation today, we have not given a separate glossary either as footnotes or end-notes. Instead, we have offered a text that explains itself in context. As we believe that the narrative voice of the text carries the burden of meaning as much as the dialectal words referring to culture-specific facts and notions, we have striven for a larger commitment to reproducing the tone and structure of the speech rhythms of the Kannada narrative, invoking Raja Rao's brand of literalism, so successfully deployed in his Indian English novel ***Kanthapura***, way back in 1939.

Smt Padma Ramachandra Sharma has invested this ambitious project with that blend of empathy and technique that marks all good translations. The communicability of the text has been tested on the non-

Kannada ears of our copy-editor Ms C.K.Meena, who has brought such tremendous care and sensitivity to her task. The warmth and inwardness of Prof Rajendra Chenni's 'critical' introduction should help readers to enjoy the text and locate it in the context of its production and reception in Kannada.

We hope that this novel will come to mean for its readers all that it has meant to readers from the Kannada 'mannu' that has made a Karanth possible.

November 10, 2002

Dr. Vanamala Viswanatha
Hon. Director
Centre for Translation,
Sahitya Akademi, Bangalore

Translator's Note

Translating ***Marali Mannigé*** has been a long, exciting, demanding journey. The rainswept prelude is the harbinger of a life so close to nature, harsh at times and conciliatory at others – an existence where gathering firewood for cooking and mangoes for pickling turn into extraordinary adventures and the omnipresent sea shapes lives with every ebb and tide. Obviously, the tapestry is rich with words, special words that deal with the nuances of rural life. Translating these unique words was made possible by the Kannada glossary the author prepared for the first edition. Mr. M.V. Venkatesha Murthy and Prof. H. Krishna Bhat were of immense help in obtaining it for me. I am grateful to them.

Dr. Ramachandra Sharma has typed out the manuscript with great care and involvement. My thanks are due to him for looking through my version and preparing it for submission.

Ms. C.K. Meena as copy editor and Dr. Vanamala Viswanatha as 'task mistress' have worked tirelessly to enhance the readability of the text. I remember with pleasure and appreciation the evenings we spent going through the manuscript. This translation has gained considerably in value due to our collaborative efforts.

I feel that one really 'reads' a book when one translates it! Nowhere has it been truer than with reference to this book. It has been a linguistic challenge, particularly the early part, for obvious reasons. I have committed myself to staying as close to the author's style as possible.

The classic ***Marali Mannigé*** is like a mountain. An honest attempt has been made to stand before it and look up, across and down in order to realise its enormity. It has been the experience of a lifetime. The women Karanth has created, so wonderfully resistant, will remain with me always.

I thank the Sahitya Akademi for having given me the opportunity to translate this landmark in Kannada Literature.

PADMA RAMACHANDRA SHARMA
November 6, 2002

Karanth – his life, his works

Kota Shivarama Karanth (1902-1997) was an extraordinarily multi-faceted man. Filled with tremendous creative energy, he was a writer, painter, dancer, Yakshagana artist, educationist, environmentalist, and anti-nuclear activist. A college dropout and a rebel who was a widely travelled man, he swore by science and modernity but fought against colonial cultural hegemony through a fierce assertion of his past.

Shivarama Karanth was born on October 10, 1902, in Kota, an isolated village on the west coast of Karnataka. He was one of nine sons and three daughters born to his parents Shesha and Lakshmi Karanth. The Karanth family was among the earliest of the brahmin families in their region to give their children an English education in a government school. Shivarama Karanth later went to the government college in Mangalore. In 1922, inspired by Gandhian ideals, he quit college to plunge into the Freedom movement and social reform. His move to Puttur in 1930 would initiate a whole new creative phase of dance, music, drama and prose. His innovative efforts brought national and international recognition to Yakshagana, the most popular performing art of his region. He married his dance pupil, Leela Alva, in 1936, causing quite a stir since it was an inter-caste union. Keenly interested in education, he started Balavana, an experimental school where children would be allowed to give free expression to their inborn skills. Karanth lived in Puttur until 1974 when he moved to Saligrama, two miles from his native Kota. His death, on December 9, 1997, truly marked the end of an era.

Karanth's prodigious literary output over 80 years covered 400 written works. They include 45 novels, 231 tales for children, four short-story collections, and two volumes of poetry. He wrote 97 plays, nine operas, and many ballets (including Yakshagana ballets, a form he invented). His non-fiction includes eight volumes of stray articles, six travelogues, one dictionary, nine encyclopaedias, two autobiographies, 13 critical works on art, and eight works on science. Karanth also wrote in English on Karnataka culture. Among his many awards are the fellowships conferred on him by Sahitya Akademi and Sangeet Nataka Akademi, the Jnanapith in 1978, and the Padma Bhushan in 1968 which he returned in 1975 to protest against the Emergency.

(Extracted from Dr. C.N.Ramachandran's ***K. Shivarama Karanth*** in the "Makers of Indian Literature" series of Sahitya Akademi)

Introduction

With its publication in 1941 Shivarama Karanth's ***Marali Mannigé*** almost at once achieved the status of a great classic of Kannada fiction. By an unusual critical consensus and with an intimate reception by readers it became a landmark in the territory of Kannada sensibility. It is not a work that humbly submits itself to the "yes" and "no" of critical wisdom. It draws the reader into its vast design, its authentic and self-contained fictional cosmos so that s/he becomes its inhabitant, inescapably involved in the predicament and the destiny of its characters. It has the sweep and even the audacity to imitate the broad and slow rhythms of life, like similar works of great realism in all literatures. The narration is patient and unhurried. It tells us about three generations of characters who wage an unrelenting struggle against 'necessity' which here takes the shape of poverty. This is the poverty of a brahmin family in Kodi, a tiny hamlet on the Dakshina Kannada coast (western coast of Karnataka state) where the rains, the sea and the river allow only a "mean" existence, testing human endurance and capacity to survive.

Kodi Rama Aithala, the patriarchal, miserly and at times querulous representative of the first generation, is a priest but also a farmer. One of the unforgettable images in the novel is of Rama Aithala "ornamentally dressed in just a loincloth and covered in mud from head to toe ... installed at the back of the boat". His struggle is to redeem himself from the social ridicule of being called 'a mere Vaidik brahmin' cadging ritual dinners. He succeeds, through his sheer perseverance and of course through the unconscious and unacknowledged exploitation of his two wives and sister, in buying land, renovating his ancestral home and thus qualifying himself to become one of the local worthies. His worldly ambition, fired by his desire to do one better than his neighbour and rival Sheena Mayya, indirectly involve his son Lakshminarayana (Lachcha) in the dubious encounters of the second generation with 'English' urbanised modernity and the lure of filthy lucre.

Karanth does not allow the careless reader to construct a nostalgic vision of the noble first generation to which the vulnerable second generation is a foil. Rama Aithala is a 'loukika', a this-worldly man, so deeply involved in the mud and storms of this existence that there is hardly any glimpse of anything that transcends it in his life. He therefore

wants his son Lachcha to be his pawn in the new world of English education, well-paid professions and money. Modernity can be called a persistent paradigm in Kannada literature; in this novel, its fascinating ambivalence troubles Aithala. It is a morally ambiguous new world in which he wants his son to succeed. It is emancipatory and full of possibilities, unlike the confined and repetitive life of mere subsistence in Kodi. But it is also an always already fallen world, where pure-bred brahmins run hotels for all castes in Udupi, Kundapura and Bangalore. Where the rigid and unambiguous religious codes and social mores have been replaced by the amorphous notions of money and success.

A female narrative

One shouldn't ignore the truth so richly embodied in the narrative by Karanth, that the unambiguous values of the first generation were male dominant and left no leeway for aesthetic and artistic aspirations. It is in fact an act of artistic subversion that Karanth creates a female narrative in writing about the male-dominant first generation. Aithala's unconscious male arrogance and exercise of ruthless power in the family are inundated and flooded away by the human and moral strength of his sister Sarasothi and his first wife Parothi who are able to enlist Sathyabhama, his second wife, into their 'moral brigade'. The omniscient narrator of the novel has a fine eye and ear for the busy and dominating male world of Rama Aithala and Sheena Mayya. But in a subtle and unobtrusive manner his voice merges in the nuances, silences and telling gestures of the women. As the late Polanki Ramamurthy said, Karanth goes on to write "an epic of happala and sandigé" in which the women's capacity to take on both the male arrogance and nature's fury often turns Rama Aithala into a childish fumbler.

Thankfully the women are not fleshless images of a generalised 'womanhood' so sentimentally valorised in popular Kannada fiction. Sarasothi is free enough to walk out of her brother Aithala's house, saying, when he ignores her, "I belong to one family and the master of this backyard belongs to another. I have nothing to do with him." Parothi and Sathyabhama are more docile and submissive. But the choral voices of the women muttering in the kitchen, speaking in the paddy fields or whispering on the deathbed powerfully deconstruct male notions of success and power. Such is the presence of the narrator that with his patient description of the repetitive acts of women's labour – farming, cooking, procreating and conserving - he bends the reader's power of empathy towards the women. He is able to convince the readers that somehow essential humanity

with its gift of survival and suffering resides in the women's world, though inevitably confined as far as the first generation is concerned.

Nagaveni, Lachcha's long-suffering wife, consciously subsumes herself into this domesticating women's world of Kodi, almost giving up her more liberal upbringing as the daughter of a prosperous advocate from Mangalore. One might feel that she is submitting herself to the valorised image of the female as the silent sufferer. Let us not forget that by the time she enters the Aithala home, Sarasothi and Parothi have already achieved the awesome status of legends and in her own words 'deities'. But Karanth shows how this woman who wilfully subjugates herself to repeat yet another tale of endurance is emancipated in her own way. She is able to verbalise her anger against her husband in terms unimaginable to Parothi; more importantly she fulfils her dream of self-reliance, rejecting even parental support to do so. The narrator is honest enough to tell us that she is conscious of being deprived of a sexual life ('inner fire' is the metaphor used). The third generation Rama is a much fuller though less aggressive human being than his namesake grandfather. The female narrative makes it amply clear that this Rama is the child of the sisterhood of women of the Aithala family and has internalised the feminine sensibility.

However, the point is that the first generation does not represent a seamless organic community; nor does the narration valorise its traditional sanctity. It is an unequal and fissured world. It's only a Sarasothi who can, with her extraordinary tenacity, beat the anomalies of this world into something humane. It is Rama Aithala who in a way condemns his son to the pursuit of money. Once again Karanth avoids the temptation of turning Lachcha into a handy symbol of the generation alienated from 'home' only to be corrupted by 'world'. Despite the multiple explanations the narrative offers for Lachcha's "evil nature", there is something in him which gives the slip to moral and psychological explanations of cause and effect. Interestingly, he is as much a made character as Sarasothi, just as invulnerable to change in his character. It is only incidentally and perhaps marginally that he represents the lost generation confronting a certain kind of modernity. U.R.Anathamurthy wonders why Karanth's moral vision fails to conceive Lachcha as a rebel, even a metaphysical rebel against the confining world of Kodi. But aren't Nagaveni and Rama rebels imbued with a genuine modern consciousness, while Lachcha is only an escapee? With the third generation, the self-contained world of Kodi begins to crack up. There are all kinds of distractions, and the mental

world of the characters expands far beyond sea-locked Kodi. It is in this that ***Marali Mannigé*** is of a piece with mainstream Kannada fiction.

Region as Nation

From its very beginning Kannada fiction eschewed the grand narrative and the complementary grand discourses which the nationalist movement had created in plenty. There was every temptation to write panoramic novels addressing questions such as nation-nationality and socio-religious reforms. The very first novel in Kannada, ***Indira Bai*** (1899) by Gulvadi Venkatrao, introduced the paradigm, which later fiction has enriched, of the 'regional' novel – the regional here being a chronotope as Bakhtin would describe it. It is the novel with an inalienable sense of time and space, inescapably rooted in a region. Any politically correct critic would find its refusal to deal with contemporary political issues, irritating if not dubious. But Kannada fiction avoids the overtly contemporary and political only to offer very complex fictional representations of deep implosions in a traditional community under the impact of colonialism which enters in the guise of an emancipatory modernity. In this respect Kannada fiction has (at least predominantly) chosen to be a "critical insider", observing with the third eye of fiction the very subtle ways in which tradition and modernity engage themselves in an exchange.

Indira Bai centralises the women's question, offering a sharp critique of the traditional role models for women especially widows but also ridiculing the fragile modernity of the westernising generation. Its highly conventional sub title 'Saddharma Vijaya' (The Triumph of the Right Religion) is in fact subversive. It is the new religion of rational morality that will triumph. The early Kannada novels of Kerur Vasudevachar, M.S.Puttanna and Bolara Baburao are woman-centred, making woman the site of the trials of both tradition and modernity. ***Indira Bai*** is polyphonic, in fact polyglot, using Konkani and Tulu along with Kannada, thus pointing towards the later novelists' urge to use the regional dialects of Kannada rather than the standard literary dialect.

The region in Kannada fiction (Karanth's coastal region, Kuvempu's Malnad, Tejaswi's Western Ghats) is the fictional space in which the novelist explores the true history and politics of his time. ***Marali Mannigé*** is a regional novel in the paradigmatic sense and not because of its specificity of social detail, dense enough to make one misread it as a sociological document. The story of the three generations who live,

struggle, leave and return to Kodi is a mature fictional account of the implosions caused by history in coastal Karnataka and yes, India. The agrarian Kodi of Rama Aithala is already yielding to landlordism, money and usury. The subsistence economy can no longer quench the energies of the Sheena Mayya family which has tasted the power that business can bring. The brahminical middle class has discovered that English education can open up opportunities. With change and opportunities, the traditional mores of caste and ritual purity have to be compromised though not really thrown overboard. Running a hotel would mean "washing the plates off which all and sundry (the lower castes) have eaten"; it is a favourite dig Rama Aithala makes at Sheena Mayya. From Kodi the narrative moves to Madras, Bangalore and to Bombay. There are radical transformations not in the socially recognisable life styles but in the sensibilities of men and women. Nagaveni discovers a whole suppressed world of emotions waiting to find artistic relief in music. Rama is the archetypal artist, a drifter, mad for the sea, and like his mother, burdened with an inner world. While Sarasothi's fulfilment can come by living authentically according to the values inherited from the community, Nagaveni has to question the values. For her, the decision to live in Kodi is a conscious choice; she has to make the choice and then live out its consequences. At the end of the novel, Kodi still represents 'necessity' and poverty. But those who are confronting it now – Nagaveni and Rama – have been to places before deciding to return to it.

Lachcha systematically destroys, with his gambling and womanising, the property Rama Aithala has created. Nagaveni becomes a tenant on a piece of the ancestral land. Between the lines one can read the changing property relationships and their impact on human relationships. At a point of time Nagaveni and Rama become poor dependants on Bachchi's Mogera (fisherman) family to survive. The last section of the novel (the unimpressive Bombay episode) uses the farcical young men of the Friends' Club to comment on the "bourgeois world of Tatas and Birlas" which they at once condemn and want to belong to. Rama's apprenticeship to Swadeshi and the nationalist movement is brief and passing. Nagaveni dismisses it as "right... But... not for people who don't know where their next meal is coming from". The largely feeble depiction of the world of the 1940s deconstructs the euphoric notions of freedom and opportunity which went with the freedom struggle. As in Hardy's 'In the Time of the Breaking of Nations', here in the time of the making of a nation, the second Rama Aithala is himself returning to the soil where his namesake grandfather lived. Another Sarasothi, his bride to be, is in waiting, to offer what one

hopes would be labour that is acknowledged and valued. Yes, Kodi the water-locked village lives out in its tiny space the struggles of modern India.

Kannada criticism and *Marali Mannigé*

That a classic lends itself to critical and creative appropriations by generations of readers is true of ***Marali Mannigé***. The changing preoccupations and theoretical approaches of modern Kannada criticism are in evidence in the major critical writings on it. D.L.Narasimhachar's review of ***Marali Mannigé*** (1943) is still an excellent introduction to the novel. Writing well within the prevalent critical understanding of 'realism' and 'regionalism' DLN makes realism itself the criterion of judgement. The novel succeeds because it takes mimetic realism to its limit, crossing over to become a piece of life itself. Its flaws – repetitiveness, slow pace of narration, proliferation of characters and incidents – are also part of its realism. DLN does not consider a realistic novel a construct bound by its own narrative codes. But DLN's review also opens the doorway to the popular ('middlebrow' ?) reception of the novel in which the biography of the characters become part of cultural memory and are turned into emblematic figures in the inner debate about tradition, modernity and ethics. In fact, most of Karanth's characters (Choma, Manjula, Gopalaiah from his other novels) have attained such a special ontological status as counters in cultural debates. It is in this sense that, as U.R.Ananthamurthy points out, Shivarama Karanth has become an essential part of Kannada sensibility.

Keerthinath Kurthukoti's epoch-making critical work ***Yugadharma Hagu Sahityadarshana*** (1962) emphasises the "rich provincial realism" almost in line with DLN. Modernist Kannada criticism (*Navya Vimarshe*) of the Sixties was the product of a blend of the influence of the Anglo-American New Critical school and the indigenous culturalist Kannada criticism. Gopalakrishna Adiga, the founding father of the Modernist school, in his essay on ***Marali Mannigé***, faults it for lacking an organic structure, an integrating artistic vision which can weld together the bits of experience that constitute the novel. He also finds the absence of a metaphorical power which can elevate its realism to the higher realm of "*dhwani*" (Adiga uses the term to refer to the multiple levels of meaning or suggestion which a true work of art possesses). However, the major exponents of Modernist criticism went on to subject the novel to a close verbal/structural scrutiny and discovered to their surprise a deep sense

of structure in what had been hastily described as a shapeless chronology of three generations. Giraddi Govindaraj, G.S.Amur and T.P.Ashoka have seen an underlying structure unobtrusively created by the repetition of the motifs of rain, weddings, departures and returns. The major debate surrounding Karanth's fiction in the Modernist school was regarding the absence of "aesthetic form" in it, the implicit critical opinion being that he did not take the form of the novel seriously. However, dissident voices in the school (Ramachandra Deva, Amur) asserted that the novels of Karanth have a form, though it must be admitted that this has not been demonstrated with the help of a sustained textual analysis.

The same period also saw the appropriation of Karanth into the cultural debates on tradition and modernity. Karanth became the emblematic figure of rationality, intellectual scepticism and a modernist critique of tradition. His fiction with its 'empirical' thought was found to be free from the religious/spiritual mumbo-jumbo which his contemporaries had succumbed to. For many young writers, Karanth was the only bridge to the older generation. ***Marali Mannigé*** was a fictional embodiment of the Gandhian age. In the post-Navya period, Karanth retained his stature as a cultural hero. But the focus shifted to his novels like ***Mookajjiya Kanasugalu***, ***Mai-Managala Suliyalli*** and ***Sarasammana Samadhi*** which were more radical in their interrogation of the traditional notions of morality and sexuality. ***Chomana Dudi***, for the rebel Dalit writers, became a work to be admired and resisted and in the end transcended. ***Marali Mannigé*** seemed to have temporarily lost its immediate relevance. But in recent years, the engagement of Kannada criticism with post-colonial theory is making the novel a central text especially for the way it foregrounds the theme of English education and modernity. Similarly, Kannada feminist theory has re-visioned this classic to discover in it on the one hand a valorisation of womanhood and deconstruction of male arrogance, while on the other, a feeling of uneasiness at the cost at which the valorisation takes place. With all its complexity, doesn't the novel perpetuate the martyr-victim-saint image of the woman? Why do Sarasothi and Parothi lend themselves to easy appropriation into the Sita-Savitri stereotypes of popular tradition? Aren't they oppressive figures symbolising the severe kind of divestment the woman has to undergo to survive in the domestic world? Don't they appear to be 'cruel mothers' to the new generation of women readers? These are the legitimate questions some women critics including Vijaya Dabbe have raised. However, they resist the discussion of Nagaveni as a woman with a modern consciousness. For the Kannada reader, these readings have become a part of the cultural biography of the text.

The question of 'return'

Kannada criticism has by and large questioned the tentative and fragile nature of Rama's return to the soil. Except a few like G.S.Amur, most critics have found the last section of the novel weak and unconvincing, even as a case of wish fulfilment. The richness of detail and the fictional strength of the earlier sections is followed by a rather hurried tour of Bangalore and Bombay. Rama himself has been found to be somewhat frivolous or light-hearted.

Without trying to plead for concessions, one has to say that this is the ubiquitous problem of depicting the generation next. The novelist is emotionally one with it, but lacks the fictional material, the props of reliable details to make it authentic. There is inevitably a generation gap between the one to which the novelist now belongs and the one which has shaped his imagination. It is also true that Karanth's most successful characters have been old women who attain a natural maturity by living a long life. Their beliefs and values are traditional, even orthodox. But Karanth's powers of fiction work more effectively in making them authentic than in depicting younger characters who share his intellectual views. From the mere reading of his novels alone, readers can hardly surmise that Karanth was a dogged agnostic, a fierce atheist and a rebel against all orthodoxies. And also in a narrow sense a rationalist. But Karanth the novelist has the negative capability of entering the souls of the first generation characters. He was 39 years old when he created Sarasothi, Parothi and Rama Aithala in ***Marali Mannigé***. In its history of over a hundred years, Kannada fiction is yet to find a great urban novelist.

The power of the novel lies in its oneness (*taadatmya*) with the fictional world it creates. Kodi, like Faulkner's Yoknapatwapha, is a well charted, complete land of the imagination, irrevocably real in its details. Without this creative ambience, the fiction of Karanth becomes fragile. Inevitably our dissatisfaction also rubs off on the characters who are not fully a part of the ambience. So Rama may appear frivolous. But the frivolity is in his bantering speech, in his clowning. He exhibits his mother Nagaveni's sensitivity and delicate moral conscience. Karanth himself denied any trace of wish fulfilment in making Rama return to the soil, to his native Kodi. He didn't see it as a fulfilment at all. In an interview he emphatically opposed construing more meanings into Rama's return. He said he saw it only as a partly helpless return to farming since other opportunities failed to come his way.

I would interpret it not as Karanth's personal wish fulfilment but as a creative myth which Kannada fiction has sought to introduce even at the risk of making the fiction appear weak. The slightly utopian epilogue of Kuvempu's ***Kanooru Heggadithi*** (1938), the equally mythopoeic happy ending of Poorna Chandra Tejaswi's ***Chidambara Rahasya*** (1985), the tragicomic waiting-in-hope episode of Devanur Mahadeva's ***Kusumabalé*** (1987) demonstrate a continuity in Kannada fiction. Instead of the more realisitic end-of-the-world mode of tragedy, great writers of Kannada fiction have relied on the rebirth and renewal mode of comedy. I believe that this has a cultural significance beyond the aesthetic. It has much to do with the legacy of Kannada fiction, which was a child of nineteenth century renaissance. Rama's return is a re-enactment of the archetype from the collective unconscious. That it makes the novel's ending somewhat weak is another matter.

Epic of the quotidian

This epic of the quotidian demonstrates Karanth's unshakeable faith in the human possibility of the ordinary. As a fiction-writer Karanth has always tried to deconstruct romantic and idealistic notions of easy transcendence. At a time when the fervour of nationalism and attempts at cultural assertion had encouraged nostalgia about Indian spiritual traditions and its heroic past, Karanth consciously developed an earthy 'materialist' view of human life. In his autobiography he tells us how he was also carried away by the idealism of the Gandhian movement, until his own encounter with the unredeemed men and women of his society forced him to adopt a dispassionate anti-romantic view of life. What really happened was that Karanth retained the Gandhian idealism in the form of his belief in the possibilities of goodness, creativity and moral redemption in every ordinary human being. In a career that produced 45 novels, Karanth did not write a single hero-centred novel, or a novel about an extraordinary being. The heroes and the saints in his fiction are those who redeem themselves through perseverance and patient will. He remained deeply suspicious of extra-ordinary epiphanies that transport human beings into higher realms. As we see in this novel, too, the moments of transcendence and aesthetic experience in the life of Nagaveni and Rama are carefully framed by the realities of their everyday life, which cannot be transformed by such experiences. Such a vision, which places its faith in the gradual, slow process of maturing, was also a personal credo for Karanth.

Realism in fiction for Karanth was not a matter of form or a certain mode of narration. He found in it the precise aesthetic embodiment of his credo which tempered idealism with the irredeemable realities of the world. In a manner which annoyed most critics he refused to acknowledge the importance of form, of the aesthetic medium, arguing that for him writing fiction was merely writing experience; that a good novel would read like a 'piece of life'; the authenticity of experience would also ensure its aesthetic perfection. The truth is that creating a credible piece of life has meant for him constant experimentation in narrative modes, tone and style in the 45 novels that he has written. What he was trying to articulate was that realism for him was a matter of a certain kind of vision of life. He saw this vision as an alternative to the idealistic, spiritualist and romantic traditions. ***Marali Mannigé*** is a major work in the Karanth canon because, in the novel, he succeeds in giving a satisfactory fictional embodiment to his unique humanist scheme of values. The scheme involves a critical rejection of many negative elements which for Karanth constitute 'tradition'. These elements include a false spiritualism which in reality is an evasion of familial, social and ethical responsibilities; an equally dubious idealism which evades the complex dualities of human nature. The third element is the solipsism which makes man deny his belonging to a community. In short Karanth's humanist vision involves a radical critique of the unexamined positions which go by the name of tradition.

Labour and '*mannu*'

In the place of tradition Karanth institutes 'labour' which for him stands for all that through which man makes himself authentic. He rejects anything which fails the test of one's own authentic experience. But 'being true to oneself' has no meaning except in relation to being part of a community, of a social reality. Karanth's emphasis is always on action (in the Aristotlean sense of enacting and fulfilling the potential, the entelechy of the self). Therefore he believes in 'labour' as the act of making oneself as a social being. The first generation characters in ***Marali Mannigé*** are seen continuously in acts of labour, especially the women. Lachcha's moral degradation is due to his evasion of labour. Labour involves a commitment to the given social reality for which *mannu* is a metaphor. '*Mannu*' in Kannada has distinctive cultural connotations of earthy, this-worldly, real, native, and negatively as 'wasteful', and 'nothingness'. In this novel it is *mannu*, the site of human labour and suffering, which is the central operative metaphor. It is a site of struggle, frustration and failure as well as fruition and fulfilment. It is also the site of "soul making" because

the men and women have to discover and construct their ethical and human identities only through acts of daily labour. It is through this that they become social beings. Sarasothi and Parothi are able to develop a moral conscience of the highest order by learning to live with *mannu*, the world of Kodi. Nagaveni and Rama return to this world realising that it is their human destiny. It is their '*karmabhoomi*' - the place of labour and one's earthly destiny.

The developments in Kannada fiction since 1899 had made available to him a narrative form which could embody his vision. He could write narratives about the lives of ordinary people, packing them with authentic and specific details, demonstrating how these ordinary men and women could attain a slow and gradual transcendence. This is the paradigmatic structure of Karanth's novels. A consciously constructed 'ordinary' quotidian reality, regional and local in its contours; men and women who eke out a small existence in this world. All this is narrated in a style and tone which refuse to rise above the humdrum of the routine. The language is also deliberately pared down almost to its bones.

Redefining 'realism'

It is not far-fetched to suggest that Karanth consciously confined himself to a somewhat limiting conception of realism in fiction. Kannada fiction from its first works has taken a very hybridising view of itself. The well-made social novel of the British tradition has not been a limiting model for the Kannada novelist. Drawing on very heterogeneous indigenous narrative traditions, he has always tried to create a polyphonic novel in which realism is only one of the many ways of narrativising experience. In the great realistic novels in the Kannada tradition, the novelist seems to exhaust all the possibilities of realistic fiction and then collapse its boundaries to reach out to a form which cannot be named using conventional categories. It is a realism so thoroughgoing that it ultimately deconstructs both 'real' and 'realism'. The novels of Kuvempu, Devanuru Mahadeva and Tejaswi are instances of this transcendence. Karanth steadfastly refuses to over-reach. ***Marali Mannigé*** is bound by its realism. But its authenticity is powerful enough not to make us aware of its boundedness. It refuses to be a metaphor for anything other than itself.

Out of the ordinary material Karanth creates human drama of great intensity. Conflict, failure and pain are used to create great peaks of psychological realism – the realism of ***Marali Mannigé*** is of this kind, the realism of the inner world. The most powerful moments in the novel are

those in which human beings enact the perennial tragedies of existence – of bereavement, betrayal, frustrated love and ambition. Parothi looking at Rama Aithala dressed as a bridegroom for the second time, Sarasothi walking out of the Aithala home leaving Parothi reticent even in her sorrow, Parothi's contented look moments before her death on Aithala's lap, Nagaveni's attempted suicide, Nagaveni and Rama watching the sea are some of these great moments. Sheena Mayya falling at Rama Aithala's feet before his death, Nagaveni trying to hide from her uncle at the fair are minor but equally intense moments. These moments have the enduring power to haunt us and draw us into the world of the novel. Because of Karanth's awesome stature as a non-conformist intellectual and rationalist, Kannada readers have at times ignored the rich texture of his fiction. His novels have been sometimes read as thesis novels. ***Marali Mannigé***, the greatest novel he wrote in the early phase of his career, is deeply satisfying as fiction. Its enormous range and depth representing human experience are its real strengths. The qualities of 'Great Realism', especially the ability to create complex and authentic characters, are in evidence in the novel.

Modernity and Kannada context

It is not unique to Kannada tradition that English and modernity should be treated as terms which collapse into each other. It seems more likely that the concatenation of colonialism, social reform and modernisation in a particular phase of Indian history created a cultural semiotics in which the signifiers 'English' and 'modernity' are attributed a certain sameness. Chandu Menon's ***Indulekha*** and Tagore's ***Gora*** are but examples of how the thematic of modernity is treated in the colonial context. What is curious is the deep ambivalence with which the two terms are invested in most of Indian literatures. They are at once emancipatory and alienating; a liberation as well as a corruption. Fiction-writers have been suspicious of a rootless critical modernity which English education seemed to have ushered in as in the case of Derozio and the new Bengal.

Indira Bai (1899) sets the trend in Kannada fiction of ridiculing the BAs (Bachelor of Arts) for their mindless blasphemies. However, the key figure in Kannada fiction is the alienated hero who has immersed himself in true modernity through his English education and returns to his traditional home only to find himself antagonised by it. He therefore becomes the site for the struggle in which 'false' tradition is rejected just as 'false' modernity is, and something new between the two worlds is imagined, however inadequately. Hoovaiah in Kuvempu's ***Kanooru***

Heggadithi is the archetypal figure in Kannada fiction of such a fissured being. Karanth's Rama is another (far weaker) version of this archetype. Interestingly, Kuvempu's novel begins with the return of Hoovaiah from Mysore, where he has been reading Wordsworth, Shelley and Arnold, to his ancestral home. It turns out to be a return to the many cruelties of the feudal world where the dark forests in the hearts of men inhabited by greed, aggression and sexuality are more awesome than the timeless forests of the Malnad. Hoovaiah's modernity is somewhat fragile and incongruous in a feudal society in which his uncle with all his evil can at least be understood. Hoovaiah's idealism is partly tempered by the earthy realities of the village and partly remains incorrigibly alien. Rama in Karanth's novel returns to Kodi where his temperance speeches, paintings and violin are just as incongruous. We are of course on uncertain ground about the consequences of his return. The motif of the return continues in the short stories of Devanur Mahadeva, the great Dalit writer. The educated heroes of his early stories return to the dalit ghettos only to realise with bitterness and intensity the humiliation of the untouchable world. In his classic, ***Kusumabalé***, English is still the metaphor for a political modernity which can only see struggle and exploitation but not the timeless truths the unlettered dalit world has always known. It looks as though the Kannada writer of fiction has not yet told all his tales of alienation and return in which curiously "English" is the eternal demon.

In the present context ***Marali Mannigé*** has the potential to speak to the readers of the new generation with an unexpected poignancy and power. Even as globalisation threatens to empty small towns and cities of its young (as the village Kodi had sorrowfully learnt in the context of urbanisation and modernisation), devastating the old world, this novel of three generations speaks intensely to us with the voices of Rama Aithala, Parothi and Nagaveni, sorrowing over the betrayal by Lachcha, lost to the allurements of the city. It speaks with the expectant voice of Nagaveni waiting for Rama to return from the ambiguous brave new world of the cosmopolis to the poor Kodi village – as wish fulfilment or commitment, it hardly matters.

Note: *Marali Mannigé* has received the serious critical attention it deserves from most distinguished Kannada critics. In my introduction, I have drawn on the insights provided by them especially as available in the following:

1. *Karantha Prapancha* (ed. K.S.Haridasa Bhatt,1969)
2. *Shivarama Karanth* (ed. T.P.Ashoka,1993).

RAJENDRA CHENNI

Author's Preface

(Preface to an early edition of the novel)

In writing this novel, I have taken on a rather daring task. Because, unlike my earlier novels, this is not the story of merely one generation, but of three generations. The story begins around 1850 and ends in 1940. The poverty-stricken life of my village is the theme of the novel. How three generations responded to the challenges of this life has been depicted here.

The ambience, names and idioms have been picked from around my native place. The style too follows the speech patterns in use in their lives. Therefore, for a number of words, one would have to look up the glossary that is provided along with the book. I have done this so that colloquial speech is not pushed out and a new diction forced in.

K. Shivarama Karanth

~ 1 ~

Parothi will complete her twenty-fourth year this Kodi, the month of rains, and begin her twenty-fifth year in Margashira. Her wedding was celebrated in Jeshta month of Hevilambi year. And what a wedding! It took place in this very season. Her father, Narayana Mayya, belonged to Manooru. Their house was on the edge of a sandy beach, and all round were cashew trees. The house had a thatched roof, not tiles; it was a wonder that it had survived the buffetting of winds from the sea.

The excitement of Parothi's wedding is really something to recall. Mayya had put up a small pandal in the front yard to the north of the house to celebrate the marriage of his daughter with as much pomp as possible. The palm leaves that covered the walls of the house all through the year were given a break that day. They had been removed to improve the appearance of the house, and stored in a heap at a distance. Another important point had crossed Mayya's mind. The Koraga's pipe-playing was very well-known in the few villages around Manooru, but would it do just to hire him for the wedding? Shouldn't his pipes be heard amidst the rasping "kara-kara" of the palm leaves? So the leaves had been brought down and piled up. Mayya had stifled their clatter all right. But did he have the right to order the palm trees, towering like so many monsters along the beach, to stop the noisy swaying of their fronds ?

However, the Koraga's pipe was sent for. But who could tell whether even the Koraga, who held the instrument, could hear it or not? Throughout those four days, what wind and rain! Despite fastening the fronds of the pandal six times over, what remained in the end was the mere cane frame. Fortunately, the wedding was in the morning – unlike the custom of the town, which was to give away the bride at night – and so there was lunch, too, later. But what of it? Which man would set out for a wedding in this kind of relentless rain, leaving behind work in the field?

Mayya's daughter was given in marriage to the family of Kodandarama Aithala. Parvathi got married to his son – Parvathi was "Parothi". The description of the wedding, you should hear it from the mouth of Kodandarama Aithala himself. He would always say that for his son's wedding, the heavens themselves had played the orchestra. Why did Aithala agree to have the wedding during the rainy season? The secret was this : Aithala was the priest of the town. The houses he served numbered over fifty. They all had to be invited to the wedding. If it was to take place during the month of Vaishakha, wouldn't there be an army of guests even at the rate of four per family? What state would the bride's people be in, if whole families turned up out of respect for their priest? Similarly, if before leaving, he had to arrange for aarathi-akshathé, the ritual blessing, and provide food for everyone, though not on the same scale as the bride's people, wouldn't there be a slight problem? Therefore, he had looked for an auspicious time and fixed it during the time of transplanting in the fields. If anyone questioned him about it, wouldn't Kodandarama Aithala himself provide the answer? The almanac and astrology danced at the tip of his tongue.

His calculations and the wedding that took place coincided beautifully. The rainy season started and it rained heavily. Transplanting began. The town hoped for the accursed rain to subside. There was no respite. Who could neglect the problems at their own homes and leave for Aithala's wedding in the incessant rain? Regardless of who came and who didn't, the bridegroom's people would have to start: Aithala and his family, a few attendants getting drenched in the rain, and some women from the neighbourhood singing songs departed holding on to pieces of blanket, palm-leaf umbrellas and anything else they could lay their hands on. Thus did the marriage party set forth in all grandeur with God Indra providing all the fireworks and dazzle.

The marriage party started off in the rain and reached the bridal pandal in the rain. It took six hours to traverse a league and a half. It was no child's play to face the sea wind and walk along the sandy beach. Clothes flapped around and

many a time, umbrellas flew off all over. The umbrella that Aithala carried was a mere skeletal frame when he reached the wedding house.

What rain! In all the flurry the backs of those who had used a protective covering made of leaves had stayed dry and warm, though their faces, chests, and legs were wet.

There was no way they could hear one another in the rain. It was like herding cattle scattered everywhere – such was the state of the marriage party. Running all the way, the band from the groom's side had already reached the bride's place even before the bridegroom's party had arrived. Not a single headman with a cloth umbrella had arrived with the marriage party. Those that didn't come had stayed back deciding to visit Aithala on the day of aarathi-akshaté, if ever the rain stopped.

The job of receiving the marriage party was undertaken in the bride's yard itself. It would have been better had it, in all fairness, taken place in the field before the house. But was it possible, now that it was waterlogged in the unceasing wind and rain? In fact, the front yard had itself turned into a field because of the rain. The palm fronds covering the pandal had flown off and the yard lay uncovered. An enthusiastic welcome was given and the party went up the platform. There were just as many people as it could hold but half the space was taken up by the pandal. The other half had turned into slush because of the people with wet feet who walked in and out. A mat was laid right there and wooden planks were put out for the people in the marriage party to sit. Even the bridegroom who came in drenched could find no comfort in the warmth of the holy fire. The smoke, the wind and the patter of relentless rain – they became the sacred verses and songs. Who knows whether the wedding meal was eaten standing up or sitting down?

All four days of the wedding were like this, with every activity taking place in the rain. Half the people who had come did not stay on till the last day. The rain wouldn't relent even on the fourth day when naagoli rituals were over and the

bridegroom left for Kodi along with his wife. Palanquin bearers and parents alone made up the marriage party. The bride entering her new home, the rain kissing the house – both were happening at the same time.

Really speaking, there was no let-up in the rain even at the bridegroom's house. There was a stream at a little distance from the house; the sea was to the west, the river meeting the sea to the south, and the river to the east. The sea was raging that year. Even as the wedding of Aithala's son was being celebrated in Manooru, a few trees from his coconut grove were swallowed by the sea. 'I have not seen the sea so maddened since the days of my grandfather,' Kodanda Aithala would say.

There was joy in the house at the arrival of the daughter-in-law. Should the mad capers of the sea dampen the enthusiasm on the day of aarathi-akshathé, when all these brahmins and householders had gathered? It was said that trees which would yield a thousand coconuts a year were sacrificed to the Sea God on that single day.

Quite some years since all this happened. It all seems so far away. What hadn't happened between the memories of her marriage and now! Was it a small matter that Parothi had gone through her married life for fifteen long years?

Three years after Parothi's wedding, aged Mayya passed away. Her mother wasn't alive at the time of her wedding. Around five years after the marriage, her father-in-law, Kodanda Aithala also died. She was now the mistress of the house. There were just the three of them living there. One was a person whose name she couldn't say – her husband – the only son of Kodanda Aithala, Rama Aithala. The second was his sister Sarasothi, who had lost her husband at a young age and had nowhere to go. The third was herself, Parothi. There wasn't another human being in the house apart from these three.

Parothi had no worries about how to spend time at home. Aithala would wander about town, since he was in charge of all priestly duties as a purohith. All his morning meals were

generally taken care of by others. He would reach home around four o' clock in the evening after his pourohithya meals. It was not his custom to return empty-handed. As a rule, a little rice, a coconut and some vegetable or the other would be brought back. After keeping them indoors and washing his feet, he would stretch himself with a sigh on the polished floor of the courtyard and snore for a short while. Getting up later, he would set off to supervise the happenings in town and come back fairly late in the night. If the midday meal was heavy, he would leave after telling Parothi that that was the only meal of the day. Sarasothi was a widow and so the rule was just one meal a day. It was enough to soak some beaten rice for the meal. On such days, Parothi wouldn't bother to cook at all, for everyone else had one meal a day and there was nothing pleasurable about cooking a meal just for herself. Sometimes, if there was some leftover rice, water would be added to it and water-rice would do for the evening. Anyhow, when the afternoon turned into evening, Parothamma would hold her prayer beads and fall asleep where she sat, chanting 'Shiva Shiva,' 'Rama Rama.'

If Aithala came home in a great rush, she would be aware of it at times; it was also possible that she would be too sleepy to realise it. Moreover, she was not in the habit of asking the man of the house when he would return home. She would be nodding sleepily even as she sat down to chant her prayers. Wherever she leaned back, that was her bed. Their neighbours were of Shudra caste. Although that was a little troublesome as far as 'purity' went, their cockerels served them well. Both women would wake up as soon as the cocks crowed, take out the utensils used for cooking and start scrubbing them. After that, the utensils used for drinking water and for special purposes would have to be cleaned with ash. The floor had to be swept and swabbed and then there could be some breathing space. Morning would break by then. The skinny cattle tethered in the sheds would moo for their gruel. When they were served the gruel prepared the day before by mixing hay and bran, in the wooden basins before them, a cow would in return yield half a measure of milk in Parothi's pot. The cow was honoured for yielding at least that much milk.

If not, milk would be cancelled in the offerings to God. After milking, it would be driven out to the field along with a few bent, old, sterile creatures, and a calf. As soon as they left the cowshed, cowdung would be gathered and thrown into the manure pit and that meant the end of the morning commotion.

Thereafter, regardless of anyone accompanying her or not, Parothi went to the fields. Work outside and work in the fields were all the same. It was one thing during the rainy season, and something else at other times. Collecting firewood, in Aithala's household, was agonising work. Dried honné and cashew leaves that had fallen in their own yard had to be swept and gathered early in the morning. If not, others would sweep them away. Those withered leaves alone had to be used for lighting the stove, for cooking food and making gruel. Whatever remained needed to be spread on the floor of the cowshed. Without dry leaves, could there be manure?

The most important of the outdoor chores was this gathering of firewood. The suffering during the rainy season was indescribable: a smoke-filled house as a result of burning damp branches and wet fallen leaves, and eyes smarting terribly. Because of this, Parothamma's eyes were always like the red Kiskaara flower. They had never gained the colour of jasmine. But, once in a while, if Varuna, the Rain God, was amenable, it was possible to gather in one month enough firewood to last six months. But it was a tiresome job. Theirs was not the only household in the village.

Rama Aithala's house was to the north of the estuary. Setting foot into the sea at that spot was tantamount to paying a levy to the God of Death, Yamaraya. The river flowing from distant forests brought along with it a lot of firewood and trees floating along. It wasn't an easy job to go there, grab them and bring them back. To do so, it was necessary to leave the estuary and go further north for two miles along the seashore. Notwithstanding the force of the rain, one had to leave home early in the morning and walk on the beach to be able to see what Varuna would bring. Sometimes, branches and boughs would arrive, and at other times, large beams. As soon as the wood was sighted, you had to jump into the water, bob up and

down among the waves, and then grab it. If you waited awhile, it would come ashore by itself. But then, wouldn't many a human heron grab it and claim possession? Consequently, only those who swam right into the sea were rewarded with the firewood. In this deed, it was Sarasothamma, more than Parothi, who excelled like a real man. Aithala also went along to get firewood. When these three soldiers got together, wouldn't a month's work be done in a fortnight?

Something very interesting happened one day. All three had arrived at the seashore early in the morning. Just like them, quite a few other people had gathered there at the crack of dawn. It was the time when the river would begin to overflow, and driftwood would be aplenty. But then, the force of the wind and the lashing of rain would also have increased. It was in such circumstances that they got into the sea. They stood knee-deep in water and watched like hawks. A hundred yards ahead was a piece of something black, like wood, floating across. Aithala rode the waves, swam, and tugged at it. With a lot of effort, he dragged it towards the shore and let go. A last wave rolled it ashore. They had thought that it would supply at least fifty loads at one go. But what did they see? What had been dragged ashore wasn't a dead tree but the carcass of a he-buffalo! Aithala hadn't grabbed the branch of a tree – it was a horn. Those standing around laughed. Unable to control her laughter, Parothi too joined them. Aithala said nothing. He gave vent to all his fury after reaching home. Parothi had remembered it for three months on end and wept in the courtyard.

That was the game they played to gather firewood. Sarasothi and Parothi had together gone into serious negotiations with the sea a couple of times and Aithala had had to pull them out. But how could anyone give up a job for fear of death? Branches thus collected would have to be carried home immediately and left out in the sun. They had to spread them out when the sun shone and gather them before the clouds appeared. There was no problem in summer. But once the rains began, enough couldn't be said about their plight! Branches would have to be brought and dried by spreading

them on the ledge by the stove. How much sunshine would there be during the rainy season, the month of Asadi? But they just had to depend on damp firewood and live on.

Whether they belonged to Manooru or Kodi, people were accustomed to building a fire during the rainy season with twigs or damp firewood. It was possible to guess which household had firewood and which didn't just by looking at the eyes of the women. With only this in mind, Parothi's father Narayana Mayya had thought that the coastal region wouldn't do for her. She would be happy at least as far as firewood was concerned if she was married to someone in the east. Therefore, he always pondered over the possibility of getting his daughter a husband born in Vaddarsé or Belooru. However, as if to hold out the truth that one was always indebted to the salt and water of a place, she arrived at Kodi from Manooru.

After firewood was collected, was housework over? Was it as if they had finished eating? Shudras could catch fowl or fish. But one had to grow vegetables since Brahma had written on the foreheads of brahmins that they should eat only vegetables till they die. There was no dearth of coconut and rice because Aithala was a priest. Vegetables also arrived once in a while. But what sort of vegetables! Just over-ripe cucumbers. From Yugadi till the end of the rainy season, you would hear only one tune – cucumber and more cucumber .... It would hang down from the pillar, from the hanging baskets and the beam as well. After eating it, there would be retching. That was why Parothi and Sarasothi had the job of pulling out the manure from the field and raising the banks in their garden to the east of the house the day after the horsegram had been harvested. A thorny fence would have to be erected on the mud lumps over the banks. Otherwise, the greens within wouldn't survive. In such work Sarasothi and Parothi surpassed each other. Sarasothi did not hesitate to even pick up a hoe.

Once the fence was erected, things might have gone smoothly if seedlings were available. They could be sown on a raised bank, and warm earth and ash could be sprinkled just

above the root. There was a tank nearby, in the backyard, from which the plants could be watered. Once in a while, Aithala too helped Parothi and Sarasothi.

Aithala had no time in the morning. Sixteen mango leaves would be needed to clean his teeth and all of them would have to be worn to shreds and thrown before he washed his face and stepped into the tank in front of the house. Holding the nose first, facing east and ducking into the water – the forceful rubbing of the body and the thundering of the mantra would go on simultaneously. From *'Shuklaambaradharam Vishnu'* up to *'Aakashatpatitam toyam'*. If he forgot anything, he would start again from the beginning. One hundred and eight Gayathri, one hundred and eight Ashtakshari and one hundred and eight Panchakshari had to be completed and only then could he get on to the bank. He would wrap the wet dhoti around him and go to the puja room. Dawn would break by then. The lady of the house had to sweep the floor, finish work in the backyard, take a hurried bath and hand over soaked rice for offering to God. There was one good thing about God in Aithala's household. He was satisfied if He was shown soaked rice; He didn't need the offering of cooked rice.

No sooner was worship over than Aithala would don priestly clothes and go out right away. A dhoti round the waist, a green woollen shawl worn as a turban on the head, a small Rudrakshi bead chain, a long umbrella in the hand. Parothi was a little happy on days when there was priestly duty. There was no hurry to cook. Rice could be made and eaten any time. When he stayed home, even before the soaked rice offered to God could be put into water, the pot would be heated for Aithala. Parothi would fall apart trying to cook in a great hurry. As the grinding stone rumbled, he would inquire what wondrous cooking was going on. Even as the finishing touch was being given, of hot oil and mustard, he would be ready with the wooden plank and the leaf to eat on. "Do you think that just because I ate yesterday at noon, I won't feel hungry till next week?" he would ask if there was a slight delay in cooking. That was why Sarasothi would help Parothi on such days. If she was around, her brother wouldn't shout so much. If he tried to hasten cooking, she would think of a job to drive him out, like keeping cows away from the backyard.

When the afternoon meal was over, somehow or the other, there were still household chores and work in the field to be done. Once a house was set up, nothing could be left out. Cattle had to be taken out for grazing at sundown. Mud had to be collected from the river and dumped onto their own small cultivated area. Once that too was done, there was still the patch of seedlings left. The paddy saplings had to be watered with the water-basket.

By then, evening would fall. Cattle set free for grazing would come back home. A little milking had to be done before the calf was allowed to drink. They should be given water in which rice had been cleaned, as well as gruel, before one bathed and lit the bronze oil lamps in the puja room. By then, thoughts of what to cook for the night would begin.

This was a normal day in Parothi's life. It was the same for Sarasothi. After Parothi's marrying, 'maturing' and coming to her husband's home, this was her breath of life. She did go to her father's now and then. The same jobs were there too, the only difference being that the father and daughter worked together there, whereas here it was the sisters-in-law. Aithala might come or not. There was neither certainty nor expectation. Parothi knew that what he did was more than enough.

All these were old memories that day when Parothamma had come to the stream and stood watching from a distance because it was in spate due to rain. With her was her shadow-like sister-in-law. The rain was pouring down. Clothes stuck to the body. In the cold, they folded their arms and looked at each other. Once in a while they looked at the stream, which was full. There was no conversation for a long time. Eventually, Sarasothi got fed up and started off towards home. 'Come, Parothi,' she said, 'This is too much.' Parothi, as if in answer, said, 'Maybe, the flood will subside only after the seedlings rot and turn into mud.'

It was believed that there hadn't been so much rain since the year Paridhavi. Every year flood waters would reach their field, and would subside just as swiftly. Since the place was near the mouth of the river, the flood would rise and fall

at the same speed. But never had the flood been this huge in Jeshta month. Once in a while, floods would come and go after planting was over. What could be done, now that floods had prevented even that? The field and the river were a single mass of quivering water. It was said that the flood had spread from the beach, flowing on all along the road to the east. Even a boat couldn't get across, leave alone a man crossing barefoot. How the water gushed!

That morning, Rama Aithala had to cross the river and go to the village beyond to officiate as a priest. He kept approaching the riverside over and over again and said, 'I am not going. Should I die in this rush of water?' It was the annual death ceremony of Nagappa Holla. Could it be postponed if he, who had to officiate, kept away? 'No, no.' Parothi had to preach the path of wisdom to her husband. 'Should the spirit of Nagappa Holla starve on that day?'

Aithala mustered all his courage and announced, 'I am going into the water.' He put his upper cloth and Panchapathré on his head and wound his dhoti like a turban. Holding the umbrella aloft, like the silver umbrella held over an idol in a procession, he descended into the spot from where he usually crossed the river. Parothamma's thali round her neck, the symbol of her wedded state, must have trembled in fear as she watched her husband cross the river. There was knee-deep water until he crossed a length of about a hundred spans. After that, there was a stretch of thorny bushes. Parothi was scared that he might lose his way among the tangle. Aithala moved on, watching the shrubs carefully. Where they parted was the place to cross the river. He thought a lot before he took his first step. 'Let the will of Lord Narasimha prevail,' he eventually said to himself and went ahead. Water came up gradually to his waist, chest and even up to his neck. It rose to his mouth and nose. He stood and pushed the water around for a while as if swimming. Like a sail, his umbrella must have carried him up-river instead of downstream. He could have been swept across to Hangarakatté harbour or across the estuary to Thonsépari. "How can man challenge the Rain God?" he must have pondered.

Aithala wasn't a fool. He knew how to swim. But then, if the shawl he had bought just that year for three rupees fell into salt water and got ruined, would Nagappa Holla's family pay for it? Somehow or the other, standing and swimming, his feet touched the ground. He came out of the main flow of the flood on to the other bank. But the path ahead could not be seen. His vision was blocked by bushes. His body grazed by thorns, he estimated that he might have come downstream a few yards at least, and walked northwards to discover the path he usually took. 'That was nothing. I could cross a thousand rivers like that', he boasted to himself gleefully. However, he also decided that he couldn't return that night if the river was still flooded. The sisters-in-law waiting on the other bank watched him without blinking until he left the river behind and reached the raised field. 'If the water is like this, stay there tonight,' they called out loudly. But who could hear them in that wind and rain? Did Aithala look back at all?

~2~

His sister Sarasothamma stood watching until Aithala crossed the river and disappeared. She got fed up later and started towards home. But Parothi didn't leave even after she was called. She still stood there. She wasn't worried about her husband's return. It was cultivation that bothered her. If the flood stayed for a few days more, what could they eat? She was concerned. Really speaking, the master of the house, Aithala, did not carry the weight of household problems the way the two women did. His life was on an even keel. Because of his priestly duties, he paid little attention to farming.

His wife, Parvathi, had been called Parothi from the very beginning. She found it totally natural that the responsibility of the household was hers. During the rainy

season, in particular, the sheets of water spread all around told the story of her life. The rain and the rainy season had left a deep imprint on her mind from the very day she got married. The rain brought up every remembered moment of her life right from her wedding day. To her, all the ebbs of her life appeared to be linked to the river in spate. Many a time, she would remember events one by one and wonder about the advantage of being born human. It was this question that faced her at that moment. Drudgery day and night and keeping a count of things to be done left her no spare time even to say 'Rama, Rama.' Even when she could, her mind was somewhere and Rama somewhere else. What pleasure was there in it ? The desire for renunciation was the result of a feeling of helplessness. Like all other married women, she had hopes of experiencing the pleasure of having a child but the frustration in having to die childless would hit her like a thunderbolt and make her feel that life was worthless. From the moment she 'matured' up to the present, she had been longing to become a mother. In the beginning, the desire made her float in a dream-like heaven. The few years that went by were spent in hopes, vows and entreaties. Ten years passed just like that and she felt she was a sinner going through the penance for a previous birth. Her cousins, younger than her, with whom she had wandered around naked, as a child, were now fondling their babies. Life was hell, true. But the hope that she could halve her pain if she could see the smile of a child born to her, would never leave her. Kittappa Mayya's daughter, more or less her own age, had got pregnant in her thirteenth year and become a mother in her fourteenth. She was now looking forward to the birth of her daughter's child. But Parothi could never hear the call of something born of her; she would never attain the good fortune of suckling her baby.

On whom could she bestow all the love and care contained in her being? Aithala? He was very rarely at home in the morning. Even if he were at home, was he the sort who would be so enamoured of a woman that he would spend time in idle talk? He knew how a man should maintain his reticence. While this state of matrimony was maintained during the day, sleep would envelop Parvathi at night since working day and

night would have tired her out. Even then she couldn't talk to her husband without fear or courtesy. Thus, in their tradition-bound family, love had to be expressed within the limits of customs and rules.

However, she was full of love, tolerance and respect for Sarasothi who shared the pain at home. But how could she hold and caress her? Then, did she love anyone at all? She never had enough of caring for or talking to dappled Gopi who yielded just enough milk to offer God. She never had enough of fondling and nurturing her calves. There were times when Aithala arrived while she sat alone and talked to Gopi. He would be surprised. ' Whom is she talking to so loudly?' he would wonder. When he saw her, he would say that she didn't need people to talk to. A wall would do as well. It wasn't mockery. It was an expression of sympathy at the loss of her normal intelligence.

Gopi had delivered five calves till then. They had all been personally nurtured and had been given away to someone or the other lest the cowshed become too full. Now Gopamma had given birth to her fifth calf. It wasn't a female and had already been looked after for a year. Gopamma looked dried up just then but it was possible through God's grace that she might produce a couple more. But what could be done with the male calf? Should Aithala drive a cart with it? It was Gopamma's bad luck that she didn't have the habit of giving birth to female calves. Aithala was not in the habit of keeping male calves at home either. The calf was there now for a year-and-a-half as a concession so that Parothi could talk to a living creature when she was bored. But for how long could it be kept? Only the other day, labourer Soorappa had said he'd have it for a reasonable price. 'Parothi, let us give off this gudda to Soorappa. Your Gopi will never give birth to a female calf. Can we keep on looking after these male calves and drive carts? Let us give it to him for we can't let Soora go. He is the one who gives us the buffalo for ploughing every now and then,' Aithala said one day. That very evening Soora came and the calf was sold off.

And then Gopi's sixth calf was also sold off. Soorappa found great pleasure in tying the calf to the yoke before he

found a partner for it. In the three years ahead, the pair would change hands over and over again and disappear. Disappearing meant becoming a victim to some sickness or the other. It being so, wouldn't Parothi remember the history of the five previous calves on the day the sixth was sold? Eventually she told herself that it was their fate and no one could erase what had been ordained by Brahma. She fondled the calf, helped him go over the barrier, blessed him and said farewell with the same fondness that children would receive. A few tears could not be withheld.

That day, Aithala had been sent on a journey across the river to attend to his priestly duties. Parothi was extremely bored. Even Gopamma's calf was not there to talk to. Soorappa had bought it that very summer. Thus, locking shut their mouths, sisters-in-law were engaged in household chores. While Parothi started pushing wet firewood into the stove in preparation for cooking, Sarasothi, not having anything else to do, began getting gruel ready for the animals, which could be prepared later in the afternoon. Smoke emanated from the damp firewood in the kitchen. Here, the burning of dry leaves caused Sarasothi to choke with coughs. Leaving the fire to burn and bravely hoping that what was on the stove would get cooked on its own, they were both breathless after bouts of coughing. They stretched themselves out on the verandah and began talking in a tone of detachment.

Sarasothi said, 'When is the first Ekadashi? If it comes early enough, we can listen to some stories from Bhagavatha. Where did it end last year? Wasn't it where Akroora took Lord Krishna for the Festival of the Bow? It will be good if it is carried on from there. Look, Parothi, what got into Kamsasura's wretched mind? How did he have the heart to kill his sister's children?'

Parothi: 'It is all His Maya. Maya of the Lord. Otherwise, would he surround those who do not want them with children instead of giving them to those who long for them?'

These words were spoken by Parothi spontaneously. The meaning became clear afterwards. Behind the meaning flashed

the backdrop of their futile matrimony. In its every fold, there was the unconcealed history of the six calves. Her husband's words came back to her. "Your Gopi will never give birth to a female calf." She associated it with herself. 'I have neither a boy nor a girl. When I can feel so bad about it, what might my husband's feelings be? Shouldn't there be at least a male creature to pour water into a dead man's mouth?' she mused.

It was a moment of extreme anxiety. What did they lack? Food, property, garden, cattle? Even in poverty, they did not need to beg for food. But all that wealth was only till the dying moment. When the moment arrived, should they not be worthy enough to have a spoon of holy water put into their mouth by children? As soon as the thought came to her, tears flowed freely from her eyes. Had Sarasothi not seen that before? She also knew what Parothi was crying for. She had consoled her enough in the past. 'Allright,' she said. 'You worship Arama more than six times a month. You go to Aneguddé every year during Sankranthi to see Lord Ganesha. There is no vow that you haven't undertaken. If one could add up all the times that you went round the Ashwattha tree, it could equal a pilgrimage to Kashi. How could all this be in vain? May be it wasn't what he had in mind. What can be done about it? Do you really have to bear a child? What's wrong in adopting a child?' she said in a consoling manner. She had longed for Parothi to conceive but in frustration, resorted to giving this advice. Parothi felt like agreeing with her Attigé, her sister-in-law. She wondered why her dull mind hadn't thought of it before. If an adopted son came, he would at least ensure their salvation after death! Her longing for a son to perform proper funeral rites for his parents would be fulfilled!

Her sorrow lessened with this new thought and, as if in answer, the clouds that had gathered in the sky scattered as well. Sunshine which hadn't appeared for a fortnight shone in their yard. At that instant, both got up at once. 'Let us get up and spread the firewood in the sun. It is generous of the Sun God to give us such a concession. Let it dry as much as it can. Let us spread the leaves as well. When they are damp,

the more you blow the quicker the fire gets put out,' they thought, and set off to work. Getting up hurriedly, they brought all the branches, leaves and rubbish thrown around in the cowshed and spread them loosely in the courtyard. After non-stop rain for a fortnight, all that could be burnt had got wet and making a fire was as difficult as performing a yagna. Who would waste such sunshine?

When work was over, Sarasothi stood in the yard, lost in thought as if she had forgotten something. 'Go and have your bath, Attigé. I shall follow you,' said Parothi. Sarasothi was in no mood for it. She had been thinking of doing something when the sun came out. Her feet wouldn't budge without remembering what it was. Parothi kept asking what bothered her, got fed up, and went to the river. She took three steps in it, finished the ritual of bathing and came back hurriedly. Rushing back, concerned about the state of the rice on the stove which she had forgotten in the flurry of work and bathing, she found Sarasothi still standing in the yard.

Looking at her, Parothi suddenly remembered. 'Attigé I remember now. Papadam and sandigé in the attic. Mould will set in with the damp. They must be put out in the sun.' 'Of course! That was what I had forgotten. You cannot go up and I cannot touch them before having a bath. I shall go quickly, take a dip and get back,' said Sarasothi and went off.

When she came back, Parothi got out of the kitchen. 'Attigé, one job has gone wrong,' she said. Sarasothi asked what it was. 'What else? The rice has boiled too much and become squishy. There is no liquid to pour out. How can you eat that sticky stuff? If it wasn't so, you would eat a fistful at least.' 'I won't die if I eat pasty rice for one day,' said Sarasothi and got up to the attic to bring down, with Parothi's help, the big pot containing happala and sandigé. Was there any chance it wouldn't stink when the lid came off? The dampness caused by a fortnight of rain had given the happala wispy beards and whiskers of mould. When the pot was rolled over and brought to the yard, dark clouds had gathered in the sky again. 'Oh, God!,' said Parothi, 'It looks as if the rain is up to its wicked tricks. We bring down the happala for drying and the clouds

are being insolent. Attigé, shouldn't we now gather the firewood? Putting it out to dry was a waste.'

'Say nothing about it,' said Sarasothi. 'It is the same whether it is damp or dry. Let us gather it in the evening. I am worried about the happala. If we finish eating quickly and clean up the ledge on the stove, we can dry at least a hundred of them.' As they went in after deciding to go in and eat, Gopamma's call 'Amba' was heard. Gopamma hadn't left the house for a week because of the rain. She believed that someone would let her out when the sun emerged through the clouds. But she had to call out since the householders, busy in their work, seemed to have forgotten her. However softly Gopamma called, Parothi could hear her. 'Attigé,' she said, 'May be she is calling out for her calf.' As she went near the cowshed, Gopamma was pulling at the halter round her neck. Parothi set her free. Gopi came prancing around like a calf into the yard. She loved loosening her limbs after the rain. Meanwhile, the clouds that had gathered were scattered by the force of the wind and the sun shone again piercingly.

Deciding to go out with her after lunch, Parothi tied up Gopi in the shade of a tree, gave her rice water and went off to eat. 'Gopi must be let out. I shall go after lunch. If the sun stays out like this, you can spread the happala in the sun,' said Parothi. Immersed in talk, Sarasothi hadn't even realised that the rice had been overcooked. Her lunch was over. Parothi went near Gopamma. Was it enough if she freed only her? There were two skinny cows in the shed. They could yield milk no more because they were past their prime. She took them along with Gopi and stepped out of the house into the estuary. If the slope of sand was crossed, there would appear the white plain. It had absorbed water and green grass had sprouted all over like a carpet. Sunlight danced on the green. Just ahead, the sea water roared, abetted by the rains. Seeing all that, Parothi just stood still. One could say she did so because of the beauty of nature but where could she inherit a great love for nature from? That sea, the river mouth, the sand bank – these were all the jewels of every moment of her life. She wasn't even aware that they had a beauty of their own. Nevertheless, she felt that her heart was overflowing.

The reason was that Gopamma was frisking around like a young calf in her newly gained freedom! Instead of eating, she wandered around, tail up in the air. Enthused by her spirit, the other two decrepit cows also ran. Parothi laughed. 'Such fools these are! Gopi, the sun is shining and you should be grazing, like bathing where the bridge has given way; instead, you want to dance to a rhythm? What if it rains?' Perhaps Gopi understood what she meant. She started grazing furiously. What haste! What joy and sparkle in her eyes! After biting into dry grass for six months, she must have found this green a veritable feast. Her old friends couldn't easily bite into the grass. They had lost their teeth and grazing was an effort. Nevertheless, they were eating with great joy.

The sun was harsh. At first, Parothi stood with her hand over her head for protection. She then moved aside and came to the shade of the honné trees. 'How terrible the sun is in the rainy season,' she thought and sat watching the cattle feeding in the shade. She was not one to sit around doing nothing. So she looked at the honné pods lying around and started collecting them in her saree till the upper fold could hold no more. 'So many pods left uncollected,' she cursed herself. She made a pile on the ground and thought of the oil miller, Govinda. He hadn't been given the pods gathered that year. Every year Sarasothi and she would collect honné pods enough for half a measure of honné oil. What had been gathered until then would easily yield that much oil. If they had been split and put out in the sun before the rains started, the miller could have got them sooner. 'What forgetfulness! If oil runs out, we have to ask someone or the other to light the lamps before God,' she thought.

In their household, it was not just the lamps lit before God that needed the honné oil. Every other light in the house had to have it. It occurred to her that her forgetfulness could have stopped the home lights from burning. Greatly distressed as if she had done something wrong, she cursed her forgetfulness that was increasing day by day. She decided to take the pods herself to the miller the very next day. But would oil come out of pods not left out in the sun? When

would the sun come out again? It might hopefully shine the following day as well.

It was almost evening as she meditated about honné oil. She must have spent a few hours at least in thought. As if suddenly waking up from a dream, she called out, 'Enough eating! Kempi, Champi, come home.' They came along. Driving them ahead, Parothi walked towards home. After tying them up in the shed, she went in. 'Attigé, curse my memory! Never gave any honné pods to Govinda. Maybe I thought we wouldn't need oil this year.' In the courtyard, Sarasothi was shaking and drying happala. 'What if you forgot? I remembered and have already given them to him. Another measure can be gathered but I have not gone out because of this accursed rain.'

They both met in the courtyard. 'Attigé, I have piled up some pods. I shall take a basket to bring them over.'

'I have almost finished with the happala. I have not gone out at all. By God's grace, the sun shone once at least. Even though the branches are not dry, the leaves are quite crisp. The branches need more sunshine. Hopefully, it will be sunny tomorrow as well,' said Sarasothi.

'Let it be sunny or not. There will be no tears for a couple of days at least because the sun shone today,' thought Parothi.

Parothi began gathering dead leaves and twigs left out to dry. Sarasothi took a basket and went towards the clump of honné trees.

By the time Parothi gathered the fuel and spread it on the platform inside, it was evening. Gruel for the cattle had already been boiled in the morning. She took some in a pot and poured it into the basins before them. Sarasothi who had gone out felt happy when she saw the green field. 'She has already piled up the pods. I can sweep the leaves, they have dried nicely in the sun,' Sarasothi thought, and made a broom with the branches of the tree and swept the leaves. She was happy to have gathered three baskets full. She went home with honné pods and brought back another basket for the dry leaves. She did indeed have three baskets full!

'Parothi, look! All this would have rotted and turned into mud,' she said.

When she brought the lamp into the courtyard at dusk, Parothi remembered honné oil again. 'Attigé, did you say you had given honné pods to the miller?' she asked. 'I don't remember his bringing the oil.'

'He will bring it sometime. He has done his job. We can remind him when we need oil. What does it matter if it is with him or us? Isn't it all the same?'

'But do we have enough at home?'

'We have quite a lot. It will last us at least for another fortnight. What is the point of burning three lamps in the wind? Is there going to be a shower of pearls?'

Parothi felt light at heart. The great problem of honné oil was solved. She had milked Gopamma. A lamp had been lit before God. She must take another bath to wash away the dirt gathered during the day. Both went to the river for a bath. The clouds hadn't gathered yet and it was still hot. It was a joy to take a dip in cold water. They stood in neck-deep water, rubbing themselves clean and talking. The topic was whether to cook for the night or not. 'You don't eat anyway. I am not hungry either, maybe because of the pasty rice in the afternoon.' 'That's right,' said Sarasothi, interrupting her. 'You are so thin because you have been fasting like this,' she taunted her. 'Your husband is not sitting doing nothing. While he is feasting, why don't you boil some gruel for yourself? If you don't feel like making it, you could have put a handful more rice into it in the afternoon and eaten it now. There are pickles. A little oil and salt will make it tasty as well.'

That was what Parothi did whenever her husband went out for a festive meal. But now it was the rainy season. 'Attigé, when the wretched wind and rain blow, eating watery rice makes you feel as if your intestines have been sliced. Of course, on hot days, such rice cools you down.'

That was true. Sarasothi remembered her younger days. When she erased the vermilion mark from her face, she had

given up meals at night. With it, the trace of watery rice had been wiped off too. Realising Parothi's problems, she said, 'Enough of this nonsense! You must be tired. You take your time to bathe and chant Shiva Shiva, I shall cook. Any curry left over from the morning?' So saying, she finished her bath quickly and went to the bank.

'Don't bother, Attigé. There's no curry left over. I like sour mango. I made a curry with it along with cucumber. It was quite tasty. I ate more than usual. There was a burning sensation in the stomach. I was wondering why. It must have been the mango.' But where was Sarasothi? She had lit the kitchen stove for boiling vegetables. While Parothi was drying herself and looking around for dry clothes, Sarasothi was already thinking of what to prepare. Parothi called out from the courtyard that she wanted nothing special and that pickles would do for her.

'What is the matter with you? We made a special preparation from mangoes. You haven't opened the jar at all.' It had been made in summer and it was true that it hadn't been opened, That was why she did not want it. 'Attigé, how could I taste it before he does?' she asked. 'Forget those customs! He must have tasted it in so many houses. Let it be. Shall I make some gojju with boiled mangoes?'

'Yes,' said Parothi but quickly remembered the havoc caused by eating mangoes in the afternoon. ' No, Attigé. Nothing needs to be made. The mangoes in the afternoon have upset my stomach. If I eat any more of it, things may get worse.'

Sarasothi was bewildered about not having to make anything at all. Eventually, some rice with pickles was all that she was destined to eat. She had told her brother ever so many times, 'Your Gopi has gone dry. It is old as well. Bring home a buffalo that will yield at least four measures of milk. We shall have some buttermilk at least.' But how did it matter to him? It was enough if he got curds in the houses he went to. Without milk and other nourishment, Parothi had become emaciated. If he was told that, he wouldn't even

believe it. These soliloquies of hers were heard by Parothi as well. 'Attigé, why do you blame him for nothing? Do I need to go to heaven drinking buttermilk?' she would say. Her mind moved from buttermilk to childlessness and ended in tears. Sarasothi realised that there was no use asking her about such things and deep-fried a little sandigé in the ladle itself. She roasted two spicy urad happala. As she sat chanting, the curry boiled as well. While both finished their "Shiva, Shiva, *Om namah Shivaya*," and prayed with the beads, cooking got over. 'Get the plates ready,' said Sarasothi to Parothi. 'Is cooking really a job? If the firewood is fine, cooking gets done in a moment. Like now. It didn't take a minute.' Parothi sat down for dinner, thankful for her sister-in-law's kindness. Since she had fried happala and sandigé, Parothi felt a desire to eat. She put some rice on her plate and what did she see? Her sister-in-law had roasted three happalas. Parothi took one, broke the other in half, put two sandigés on top, took a cup of water in the other hand and went out.

There was no light in the verandah where Sarasothi sat. She heard Parothi's footsteps. 'Parothi, isn't it time you ate?' she asked. 'Attigé,' said Parothi, 'Am I possessed by a spirit that I'm able to eat three happalas? You have one at least.' She kept them before Sarasothi and left. The happala stayed there until her prayers were over. Sarasothi never slept until the Panchakshari had been uttered a thousand and eight times. Could the custom be broken just for the sake of happala? By the time it was finished, Parothi had finished eating and cleaned up the floor. The lamp in the kitchen came out too.'Haven't you still eaten the happala?' Parothi asked. 'I thought I'd finish chanting prayers and then eat,' answered Sarasothi. Prayers were over and Sarasothi divided the happala yet again and made Parothi eat it.

The cool breeze of the night was blowing. Rain clouds moved swiftly and the young moon played in their midst. Seeing a little light dancing around in the verandah, Sarasothi said, 'Attigé, why on earth do we need a lamp here? There is moonlight outside.' They put out the lamp and sat facing each other, leaning against pillars. They started thinking about the

greens they could grow that year. 'Attigé, not a single seed from what we grew this year. This accursed rain went on and on and the saplings rotted away. Who will give seeds for another seed bed? Lady's fingers had sprouted so well,' said Parothi.

'That's right. How long can cucumber last? A month at the most. Chowthi will be over by the time seeds are planted and the field ready for use. What shall we cook until then? If we fry happala and sandigé everyday and prepare something with mangoes, he will get angry. If we use coconut, he will say that we didn't collect enough coconuts because the sea has washed away quite a few trees and we need to be careful. It has to do for meals, for oil, and for special rituals.'

'Yes, my Anna, my big brother, is always like that. What is cooked must be tasty, what is prepared today must not be repeated tomorrow. Whether he brings something home or not, things must go on as usual.'

'We were too foolish last year. If we had sown some sesame seeds in the lower field instead of leaving it fallow, we could have had a couple of measures of oil at least. He said no to it. What does he gain by hollering now when coconut oil gets used up?'

As they kept on talking, their voices grew weak with the drowsiness that follows a hard day's work. Neither could hear what the other said. They lay down where they sat and even fell asleep. Just then there was the cry of 'Sambashiva!' as Aithala came in through the door. He stamped his feet hard on the verandah to get the dust off. Keeping the umbrella and shawl in the verandah, he went back to the river, washed his feet and came in. 'What! Asleep already? Can't you have a light burning at least?' he said.

Parothi woke up startled. 'Attigé, I think he has come home,' she said and went into the kitchen to light a lamp. 'Why did you cross the river in this darkness? You shouldn't be playing with flood waters.'

'What darkness? There is abundant moonlight. Moreover, Subraya of Kanyana was with me. He had gone to Kundapura

for the shandy. I met him in the market at Kota. Both of us started off briskly. The water hadn't gone in the morning. The flood water must have come in as well. Probably, it might subside in the morning. It has not been too long after the rain stopped. Water might subside.'

'Did you say that there was a lot of water?

'There was indeed! Who measured it? My attention was all on what Subraya was saying. Sarasothi, don't you remember Subraya's sister, given in marriage to Airodé? She is now staying with her brother. What was the name of her child? Where is it now? Here, or there in Airodé? I remember it as a small child. It is going to get married, I believe.'

'She is no child. Savithri is over ten years old. She'll be eleven by the next harvest. Is marriage something that is to be celebrated after she grows up? But she is a lovely girl. What nose, what eyes! Poor thing, to have been left with no support when so young, after her father died. But somehow her mother and grandfather brought her up. Is she getting married now? God bless her. Where is the bridegroom from?'

'He mentioned some place. I have forgotten it.'

'Enough of you and your memory,' said Parothi bringing in a lamp. 'You women remember everything from ear-studs to lady's fingers. Are we men like that?' Aithala said in jest. Then he remembered where the bridegroom was from. 'I remember. He is the son of Perampalli Lachchamayya. He has only one son and these people have only one daughter. That bridegroom was not easy to come by. He has fields that produce ten measures of corn. Lachchamayya produces the same amount too. So there is no need to scratch for daily meals. Moreover, if a girl is given to Peramapalli, she will at least not be cheated out of a meal. The soil there is like that. Even during the severest summer, there is no dearth of huruli for cooking,' he said. Aithala's village could produce toor dal twice a year, and at other times, green gram would have to be used for cooking. Of course, it did cool the body but it wasn't as palatable . So there was no wonder that huruli bélé tovvé got this place of honour.

From the topic of the wedding, Aithala's thoughts flowed towards the morrow. 'Sarasothi, you and Parothi better go to sleep. I am going to see Soora right now. If water subsides in the field, he can get to work on it. His fields are lower, so water won't subside there all at once. If he gets our field ready, we can start sowing. Who will bother about us when other people start ploughing and sowing? Not a single man will be available for work,' he said. Soorappa's house was half a mile away. Aithala got ready so that he could give him directions that very night. 'Is Anna mad?' said Sarasothi, of her big brother. 'Why should he go to see Soora in the dead of night? After all, it is Soorappa. He sleeps after drinking liquor at sunset and wakes up only at daybreak. If he is told now, will he remember it tomorrow morning? I will go in the morning to tell him. If I call his wife, she will feed him with some leftover food and send him to the field,' she said in a consoling manner.

So they both lay on mats. Parothi woke up in the middle of her sleep and thought that an insect was running over her. When she awoke, she remembered Sarasothi sleeping next to her. She also remembered the conversation she had had with Sarasothi about adopting a child. Deciding to talk about it, she turned around to her husband only to discover that he was not there. Even as she began to imagine where he might have gone, she heard the sound of his footsteps from the yard. Parothi stayed in bed rubbing her eyes. Aithala came in. 'Haven't you slept yet?' he asked her. 'I did not want the job to be postponed till the morning. So I told Soora and he has agreed to work in the field. He thinks the water will have subsided by then,' he informed her. 'He was thinking of what he had to do for others for free in the next two or three days, and when he would have time for his own cultivation.'

When Aithala lay down, there was only one dream he had. Everyone else had finished sowing but his own fields lay fallow. He had no one to work in his fields.

He woke up, still concerned. So as to be left in no doubt, he walked to Soora's house straightaway. Seeing him in the yard, Soora's dog started barking. The sound awakened the

household. Aithala kept asking the dog to keep quiet and calling Soora to find out whether he had heard him or not. Eventually, when he was just about to decide in despair that Soora wasn't as alert as his dog, there was a response.

He gave the message to Soora, came home sleepy-eyed and lay down on the mat, muttering. 'Sambashiva.' It was his habit to say it whenever he was tired or upset. So his wife asked him gently whether anything was the matter. Aithala frowned. 'Ayya, there you go! Why on earth should I be upset? I yawned because I was sleepy. I had dinner late as well. So I yawned.... Go and sleep now,' he said roughly. The issue of adopting a child was at the tip of her tongue. But she had to decide against bringing it up, considering his chiding tone. She lay down thinking she would sleep. Sleep came to her whenever she called.

Over there, Aithala started snoring loud enough to beat the clamour of the coconut fronds hung from the wall. The roar of the sea in the rainy season, trying to surpass them could be heard incessantly. Aithala's snoring, the sound of the coconut fronds, and the roar of the sea mingled into a lullaby.

~3~

Rama Aithala had reckoned right. Before dawn the next day water from most of his level fields had subsided to half its previous height. Sarasothi, having got up early in the morning, went to the riverside first, saw with her own eyes how much the water had gone down and went to Soora's house from there. Soora's wife came out, wakened by Sarasothi's call and before she could ask why she had come, Sarasothi had already given her message. 'Abba!' said Soora's wife. 'Once these brahmins get hold of something, it becomes a fixation.' Sarasothi wondered why she said it. 'We haven't even got through one bout of sleep after your brother came

over to tell us. What is the hurry at the dead of night? Things get started in the morning, don't they?' she asked. The sister wasn't aware of her brother's conquest the night before. She was amused. ' You can scold us as much as you want. If you get the field ready for this year, we won't bother you till the next,' she said.

Soorappa, however, was busy in the field by sunrise. His work went on to the rhythm of the cold wind and drizzle. But the job of getting the paddy seedlings from the seed beds was done slowly. Apart from Soora's wife, they could find no one else to lend a hand. Do you think Aithala would be intimidated by that? He stepped into the seed bed with his wife and sister. All three women, getting wet in the rain, pulled out the seedlings, made them into bundles and flung them across. For Aithala, it was nothing to be concerned about. Taking long strides, he transported the load to the field for planting. There was nothing Aithala couldn't do if he set his mind to it. Whatever had been pulled out was planted in the field by the time evening fell. Cultivation that year was done in a big rush. It was because flood water had rushed in and everyone's work had been held back. After that, everyone had started hurrying up in case the seedlings rotted. There were not enough hands around to help everyone at the same time. Consequently, half the burden of pulling out the seedlings and planting them fell on Aithala's household. The outsiders were: Soora for ploughing, and his wife for transplanting. Sarasothi paid off the debt owed to Soora's wife by working alongside her on her field so that it couldn't be said the field fell fallow because she worked for others for free.

The field to the west, which looked like a broad lake at the beginning of the rainy season, was now all green after planting was over. The sight of the sea wind and south wind making the green of the vast field ripple like waves for miles and miles was something that put even the sea to shame. From Aithala's yard, both east and west could be seen. Turning west, there was the familiar blue and blue-green. Rolling waves foaming at the edge. Turning east, a vast field seemingly as large as the sea. The sight of green leaves hissing and rolling like waves.

Though the rainy season was a little troublesome at the beginning, later on it progressed with each star, in the way the farmers desired. Not only that, the flood waters were also very helpful. There were people who had gathered three times as much firewood as in the previous years. However, since Aithala's family lived too close to the mouth of the river, they couldn't be adventurous and go deep into the sea. But you couldn't put into words the good fortune of those who lived at the right distance. There were people who had enough firewood for themselves and sold the rest. There were also those who buried and hid floating branches right there on the beach, and sold them in secret. Sarasothi and Parothi were not enamoured of such trade. It was enough if they gathered enough firewood for their household, and that they did obtain. Now they waited for the first Ekadashi. That day, too, arrived. Readings from Bhagavatha and Ramayana began in the town. As she desired, the story tellers started from where Akroora took Krishna and Balarama to Kamsa's palace. They didn't notice the passing of the rainy months.

As soon as the month of Bhaadrapada was over, the paddy corn turned golden and the plants reclined like Bheeshma on a bed of arrows. It was time for blacksmiths to sharpen sickles. Clouds covered the sky and there was the roar of thunder. The sun shone until the farmers went to the field. Even as they cut the grass and bundled it, dark clouds would cover the sky and in an instant, there would come lightning and rain! The mornings would grow dark. From the sea, creeper-like lightning would spread, sweep and pounce on the hills in the east. A flurry about where it struck, even as one watched and guessed which palm tree got burnt. One day, Sarasothi and Parothi — they had just started reaping — had lightning strike a mere hundred yards from them. Their bodies had stiffened at once. Sickles fell from their hands. When they got back their senses, Sarasothi was muttering ' Dhananjaya, Dhananjaya' in fright, 'Say Dhananjaya! Only He can save us,' she said. Parothi did so. They looked back and what did they see? Six or seven palm trees long the beach were glowing red. In a minute they had left the field and were running homewards. No one was brave enough to stay in the field that

day. Was it safe at home either? Anyway, they threw the axe and hoe outdoors and started chanting Dhananjaya's name.

That was the last day for the frolic of the clouds. Then there was sunshine all the time. The fields that were yellow had turned black again in six or seven days. A musical tune, 'oo...oo...oo...' could be heard in the lower fields. Soorappa's oxen were pulling the plough. In Aithala's yard, Soorappa's wife, Sarasothi, and Parothi, cloths tied around their heads, were threshing the corn and shouting 'Holi, come running' now and again with great enthusiasm. Aithala's family, which had been saddened by the thought that they had lost that year's harvest because of rotting seedlings, were now overjoyed at the heaps of paddy. 'There must at least be ten more measures of paddy this year,' said Parothi. Aithala got suddenly angry. 'You speak nonsense. Why only ten measures? Why not say forty-two measures?' he said. Deep inside, of course he knew the truth. But he would not accept it openly. That was why he put away the kalasé and kolu they had brought for measuring. It was only after Deepavali was over that he measured the paddy when he was all alone at home. He made sure that the women were out and then he measured it. But what then? It was not ten but fifteen measures. By the time Parothi and Sarasothi returned home, his measuring was over. 'How much is it ? As much as last year's at least?' Sarasothi asked, 'Two measures less because of your big mouth,' said Aithala.

However, Sarasothi was not too small to reckon with. When Aithala was not there, she measured it herself with Parothi and made sure that her guess was right. 'Really, my brother! Lying even to the family! I shall ask him when he comes home. We are needed for working but not for knowing how much paddy was grown. I knew when I saw the half stack that there would be at least three hundred bundles. But this brother of mine!' she said.

'He must have kept it a secret thinking we would tell everyone.'

'No one is so stupid! Do we go around telling the whole town as soon as harvesting is over?'

'Anyway, we know now.'

'This year we have hay and paddy as well. If we get crops from the slopes, we must buy a buffalo.'

'Don't talk of buffaloes for my sake. I don't need to get fat drinking buttermilk and eating butter.'

'He won't grow any weaker by eating it. What is wealth for if we cannot eat well?'

It was not only in Aithala's house that there was a greater yield of paddy. By harvest time, all the farmers were full of enthusiasm. Most of them had reaped a good harvest. From the day the rain calmed down, the same sound from all corners – 'Holi, come running.' Threshing in every courtyard, making haystacks and storing the paddy. The shouts of people before the threshing stone were not in vain. Deepavali in every home that year had an added radiance. The rich realised that the meanest thief would not break a contract. Nevertheless, if anyone asked Aithala, Soorappa or Subraya or anyone else in the town, they would say, 'A rupee has sixteen annas. We won't be cheated out of twelve. If there had been no flood in the first fortnight, the rupee would have fetched eighteen annas.' No one realised that the silt brought in from the flood had helped the crops grow.

Anyway, the second rains of the year were over. The roar of the sea had gone up during the harvesting, but it was peaceful again. It indicated that the rains were far, far away. Aithala went everyday to see his washed-out coconut grove. No trees had fallen that year. Instead, his eroded grove had gathered soil. There was a sand bank three acres big, just in front. The anger of the river mouth had been directed against the southern part. Quite a few groves were totally destroyed. It was said that some houses too had been demolished. Hearing that, Aithala said that the river wouldn't be crawling for at least one more year. Standing on his own field, he looked at the half-eroded and fully eroded fields and wondered loudly whose they were. 'That must be Vittappa Naik's. The other new one is Sundara Shanubhog's. That's right,' he said to himself and went back home. 'Sarasothi, didn't I tell you

yesterday that two or three acres of coconut grove had been washed away the other day? One was Vittappa Naik's and the other was Sundara Shanubhog's.'

'Poor souls, how much money washed away in water!'

'You are silly. That money was made by cheating others. Particularly that Sundara Shanubhog! He has never sent forty-two measures for Deepavali till now. He never seems to have more than thirty-nine to forty measures. What you earn by doing nothing ends up as nothing!'

Sarasothi got angry. 'What is the matter with you? Is it the insolence of having got fifteen measures more of paddy? When they lose their grove, you say they had got it free. Remember the trees you lost from your own grove some years ago? Those were really gained without effort. Getting money as dakshiné from the houses you visit . . .!!' She mocked him and walked away.

Aithala was hard hit by his sister's blow. But he was in no position to give an answer. He felt greatly pained as he kept remembering her words. Moreover, how did she come to know about their having harvested fifteen measures more? Did she measure it? It made him burn within. But not having the courage to open his mouth, he went away murmuring that it was like a good-for-nothing old woman trying to take charge of sixty towns, and went off for his bath. He was in no hurry that day to finish his chanting. He kept ducking into the water over and over again, holding his nostrils. Though he said 'Gururdeva, Gururvishnu' ten times over, he stumbled in his chanting at the end. As he sat before the idol to worship, he wasn't aware when he rang the bell and when he didn't. After finishing everything, he came out and saw the leaf laid out for lunch. ' Parothi,' he said. 'I must go immediately to Manooru. You go ahead and eat.' 'Lunch is served. Why don't you eat and go?' his wife asked. 'Let those fifteen measures of rice be finished. Then I'll come back,' he said walking away with his arms swinging fast.

Sarasothi wasn't there to see this incarnation. She was in the cowshed. An old cow of theirs was about to die. Sarasothi

sat weeping before it. When Parothi came running to ask her what the matter was with her husband, what she saw there was something else altogether. Her cow Kempi had died. Parothi's eyes filled with tears. She saw Gopi and another cow. ' Why are you standing here? Go and come back in the evening,' she said driving them out of the shed. But they kept on coming back, so she shut the door.

'Where is he?' Sarasothi asked.

'He has gone off, angry. He talked about fifteen measures of rice, saw the food served, and walked away. Who knows with whom he is angry?'

'Who cares? The anger of a poor man hits him in his belly. Am I the one to be scared by his display? I can live anywhere,' she said.

She got up from there. 'You go in, Parothi. You can't bring back to life what is dead. It has snapped its ties with us. It has died .... I shall tell the Koraga to come.' She walked hurriedly away to Koragara Koppa. Three Koraga men and a Korathi came back with her. The door opened and Kempi's dead body was taken away. Sarasothi and Parothi stood watching Kempi's final journey. Right next to them stood Gopi and Champi craning their necks, watching their companion being carried away.

Tearful Parothi consoled Gopi. 'Come inside. You haven't eaten your bran. I shall bring it to you now.'

She went in and instead of getting clear bran, she gave them the rice she had prepared. The cows sniffed at the rice in surprise but wouldn't touch it. Both women sat on the verandah, immersed in thought.

'The home he doesn't want is not for me either,' said Sarasothi. Parothi didn't speak at all.

By sunset, Aithala returned from Manooru or somewhere. He was as fiery as in the morning and didn't speak to anyone. He wandered around the yard and came to the cowshed. He couldn't see Kempi. 'No one bothers about the house. Shouldn't

anyone be bothered about cows not coming back home? It's getting dark. They don't do their jobs but compete with one another in talking about other people's business,' he said aloud and went around the cowshed. Not seeing Kempi, he went to the river and started shouting for Kempi to get back. Parothi, who was working inside, heard her husband and came out. 'Kempi will come, and something else too,' said Sarasothi from the puja room. It was a time when everyone was burning with anger. Deciding that it would be better for her to keep calm, Parothi came to the river and said timidly, 'Kempi is not there. Why do you keep calling?' Aithala repeated the words. He couldn't comprehend a thing.

'She died in the afternoon itself. Didn't I tell you last night that she was neither drinking water nor eating food?'

'What did you say? Did Kempi die? Have you killed her? It is better if everyone leaves like that, one by one, when it becomes difficult to live here with honour.'

Parothi could not understand a word of what he said. She knew that everyone was upset since morning but she did not know the cause of the anger. Not having the courage to find out, she kept quiet, thinking that questioning might make matters twice as bad. Sarasothi too kept quiet. Parothi did the housework, all by herself, and went to the cowshed. Gopamma did not yield milk. ' How could it? Death means the same to one and all,' Parothi thought and went back home.

Looking at his cheerless face, Parothi was convinced that her husband hadn't had his lunch. She too had fasted. She went to him and told him that food was ready and he could eat. 'Eat in this God-forsaken house?' asked Aithala.

Parothi waited dutifully to serve food. Mumbling a chant, he sat down to eat. Parothi served what had been cooked, one item at a time. Aithala ate absent-mindedly. He lingered over his food, and dinner went on for a long time. The result was that food had to be cooked for a second time. Parothi was terribly hungry that day. Otherwise, she wouldn't have cooked rice again. She came to her sister-in-law. 'Sarasothi, you haven't eaten lunch. Eat a little now at least,' she said. As she made

the plea, her voice got stifled and there were tears in her eyes. Sarasothi could hardly ignore her sister-in-law's concern. 'You eat. I want nothing from this house, not even dinner.'

Who knew what happened later? Aithala's snoring could be heard from the hall. His behaviour had been abnormal the whole day. He woke up around midnight and saw a light still flickering. He wondered what the matter was. Though the strange experiences in the morning had disturbed him, he had slept soundly and was now like a new-born child. He kept wondering how late it was and why the light was burning. He couldn't figure anything out and finally called Parothi. She got up half-asleep and came over to where he was.

'What is this, the light is still burning?' he asked. Parothi said nothing.

'Haven't you eaten yet? It is so late.'

'No.'

'What? Why so late?

'How can I eat alone? Attigé hasn't eaten a thing since afternoon. What did you say to her? She says she will have nothing to do with this house. She says the relationship is over. You went off without eating, as if you were angry. Even the cow....'

Aithala understood everything, one by one. He was not hungry and sleep had cooled his temper. What he had said, his sister's answer, his getting up in anger, the death of the cow, no one eating in the household... All these events flashed across his mind.

'Didn't you eat at all?'

'You went off after I had served food. Was I so desperate for rice that I could eat after you left?'

Aithala cooled down as fast as he had flared up 'Parothi, if one person loses his mind and does something wrong, should everyone else do the same? Where is Sarasi? I shall myself tell her. If she doesn't look after the house, how can I go on

my wanderings all over the town for my priestly duties?' He went to Sarasothi. She had heard everything he had said. She was also touched by it.

'Sarasothi, go and eat. If this Rama acts silly and says something foolish, should even you get angry? It is my bad luck....' said Aithala.

'Go and sleep,' said Sarasothi suddenly.

'Will both of you eat?'

'Yes. We shall. Go and sleep. There is nothing more to be said.'

Aithala went back to sleep. Sarasothi, who had not eaten anything at night for years on end, ate with her sister-in-law to console her brother. They finished eating and went back to their respective places.

Day dawned. There were lovely black clouds in the western sky. The morning sun had spread a beautiful rainbow across the sky. Sunshine was kissing the palm leaves that were wet with dew. How clear the day was! As if it had taken a bath and stood wearing new clothes! The day began and unpleasant memories of the day before didn't bother anyone.

Aithala went off enthusiastically to see his fields in the morning. He reached the field by the mouth of the river and, instead of looking at the field ahead washed out by the flood, he started counting the sail boats coming to and leaving the harbour. 'That must surely be a boat from Deevi. Let them come. If more arrive, then rates for rice will rise,' he thought. He went round and round the fields wondering if by Krishnashtami he could plant a hundred coconut seedlings on the newly formed sand bank.

He had always had the habit of forecasting the future of Hangarakatté harbour by watching the sails of the various kinds of boats that came there.

'O, this is Koti, this is Pada, this is Manji,' he would go on, able to recognise them from quite a distance. 'This is from Deevi, this belongs to the Siddis and this is from Kochi.' He

went back home wondering about the non-arrival of Siddi boats. How many months for the festival of Koteshwara? Would date palms arrive by then? If the Siddis didn't bring them, who else would? 'Sarasothi,' he called as soon as he reached home, as if all that had happened had been forgotten. 'Ten or so Deevi boats have come to the harbour today. A whole lot of coconuts and coir rope are being unloaded. It appears as though coconut prices will fall.'

'What does it matter to us if coconut prices fall ? Do we have enough to sell? So Deevi boats have come, have they? We may get a good rate for paddy.'

' Who knows? It was around a rupee until yesterday. It would be fine if we can get around a rupee and a half.' After saying all that, he went off to the river to bathe.

Lunch was over. Everyone appeared to be at ease. The next day or the day after, the fields had to be sown with horsegram or sesame. Soora had come without having been asked and got the field ready. So Sarasothi decided to bring up new matters before her brother. She had two issues in mind. One was about adopting a child. The other was about buying another buffalo for milk. Which of the two could she bring up at that moment? She couldn't bring up both of them. He might think favourably about a buffalo if she mentioned it after paddy rates had risen. It was fruitless otherwise. 'A buffalo would mean at least eight gold coins. Are we going to get into debt?' he might ask as soon as she opened her mouth. So she decided to talk about adoption.

Sarasothi saw her brother sitting cross-legged in the yard and asked him ' What do you think about it?'

'About what? '

'I shall tell you about something that doesn't concern me. Listen if you wish or else don't.'

'Why don't you say what it is?'

'Is this life permanent? If any of us dies tomorrow, shouldn't there be someone in the house to do the obsequies?

What you have is enough. Wouldn't someone give you a child for adoption after seeing what you earn from farming?'

He had not imagined that Sarasothi would talk about it. When the topic came up, even Parothi came out and stood leaning against the wall in expectation of her husband's reply.

'Sarasothi, you are out of your mind. If you pick up a baby crow and make it the koel of our house, will it work? It is the same story wherever I have performed Upanayana, the sacred thread ceremony, during the adoption ritual. If the child is found unsuitable, one is left with great pain. It is different if the child actually belongs to one's own family,' Aithala replied in a quiet voice.

'Do you mean to say that we just carry on without bothering about it?' asked Sarasothi.

'If God wills it, I may have a child of my own,' Aithala said.

Quite a while later, Parothi joined in. 'My horoscope doesn't appear to indicate child-bearing. You said so yourself sometime ago.'

'What does it matter if your horoscope says so? Is it a lie then that Brahma has granted me the fortune of having three children?'

There was nothing more they could say about the matter and so everyone kept quiet. ' Sarasothi, this year we shall harvest in the same field that was sown in last year,' Aithala said as if to change the topic.

'If we do that, we shall not reap a single grain of corn. What happened last year? Three quarters of what had been sown went to satisfy the hens all over the place. There is no way we can survive by harvesting with so many Shudras around us.'

'Let us plant paddy where we grew cucumber last year. Let there be cucumber on one side. We will have a fence around both. Horsegram or sesame can be grown in the fields for harvesting. Even if we gather no grain, we can at least have dry leaves.'

So, the very next day, they started building a fence for the cucumber patch and the harvest field. Joined by his family, Aithala started raising the edges of fields. It took three days to dig and keep lumps of mud in a line, smearing mud on them and pushing thorny twigs in so that the fence was sturdy. Paddy was sown. In the remaining two fields urad and horsegram were sown. Aithala decided against sesame seeds. 'I don't like the oil. If necessary, on days that chitranna is made, we can borrow half a measure from someone. Honné oil will do for lamps. How is sesame any better than urad or horsegram to make palya?' said Aithala. Sarasothi planted avadé which would bring in five measures for cooking.

When horsegram, urad and avadé were sown, the field had to be fenced at least when the corn was ripening. Driven by envy, neighbouring villagers might let their cows loose. It wouldn't do at all for buffaloes from other villages from the east to cross the river and enter their fields.

During the second harvest, much time was spent going to the field ever so often. Then, Sarasothi was never happy unless she wandered around, bare-headed, stick in hand. It was her habit to drive even a small calf half a league away from the field.

That year Aithala's luck had run low in one particular area. It was true that the price of paddy had risen. But by the time they obtained the yield they were exhausted after all the hard work. They had made the harvest field near the cucumber patch and lost all their energy in keeping away the hens from the Shudras' houses. Their water source was at a distance. After the first harvest they were fed up with scooping water all the time. Around three hundred water baskets had to be filled for the river water to reach the fields. No one else had a field at such a distance. As a result, when their turn came to use the water channel again, it would have gone dry and they would have to scoop up water all over again.

So far they were levering up water. But it wasn't enough that year. A water-basket had become absolutely necessary for cultivation. So they made it. They beat a tin and put a cane wedge at its mouth and manufactured it themselves. Parothi

twisted a rope from where she sat during her monthly periods. Brother and sister got together and dug the water channel.

The next day, when Parothi took Champi and Gopi for grazing, what did she see but brother and sister standing like wrestlers on the river bank holding the water-basket in both hands. They had been continuously filling it with water and draining it. It was afternoon when they started and night when they finished. Aithala's arms and shoulders were aching. In between, they had to check whether the water had reached the fields or not by going there many times. How could it reach there? The soil had absorbed all the water which hadn't even flowed till the end of the channel.

That night Sarasothi and Aithala had decided that a water-basket was any day better than raising the water by levering it. Nevertheless, when morning broke, Aithala was massaging his arm saying it was useless. His decision to water the fields every other day melted away and he felt it was more than enough to do so once in three days. The sister realised that it was something her brother was incapable of doing. He kept dodging it with excuses saying that he had to go to Parampathi that day, to Manooru the next day and Saligrama the day after that. Parothi filled in for him. She told Soora's younger son that she would give him happala or some such food if he took Gopi and Champi somewhere near for grazing. The boy couldn't wait to eat happala from a brahmin's house and thus agreed to take the cattle out for grazing.

However exhausted they felt, the sisters-in-law never asked others to do the water-basket chore. What could they save if they paid others to do it?

Anyhow, by the time of Makara Sankranthi, the fields had ripened. Horsegram was pulled out and a feast of avadé went on at home without fail. Every other day it used to be part of the meal. Aithala ate it for a couple of days with relish. Later, his ardour diminished. So, lest he get fed up with it, it was rubbed on the red floor to polish it.

That year was happier than usual. The paddy rates were just as Aithala desired. The paddy he wouldn't sell for five

pavali despite continued offers, was sold for six pavali by the time of Makara Sankranthi. It was believed that a lot of paddy was transported to Goa that year. People from Deevi bought rice at the price demanded. The rate for horsegram was just as good. A little was used for domestic needs and a little for sowing. All the rest was for sale. There was nothing special about urad. Avadé branches were ready for gathering. Both were needed for domestic use.

On the whole, Soora estimated that Aithala must have earnt at least fifteen gold coins in cash from cultivation alone. However, he didn't keep back any part of his lease. Anyway, in Aithala's life, that year seemed to be one of excitement. At the same time, Sarasothi decided to bring up the topic of buying a buffalo. But Aithala philosophised, saying that they had anyhow gone without buttermilk for so long. There was nothing to be achieved by consuming buffalo curds. There were cows for cowdung. That was enough. In a cowshed, cows were more decorative than buffaloes. Disappointed, Sarasothi gave up, saying that she didn't need buttermilk anyway.

~ 4 ~

The time of Makara Sankranthi passed. Sarasothi and Parothi went to the Saligrama fair that was held then. When Parothi offered coconuts and fruit at the temple, she didnot forget to offer gratitude for the year's prosperity as well. She prayed to Mukhya Prana to ensure the same prosperity the following year. Within a month of the fair, Aithala's cultivation activities were all over. Horsegram and urad had been pulled out and the land was vacant. Avadé branches had been cut and the plants had been pulled out as well. What remained was the work on the cucumber patch in the backyard. But the heat of the sun increased as days went by. It was impossible to set foot on the ground. If cucumber

was watered in the evening, it would wilt the very next day. The earth there was so thirsty! Noticing the heat and the colour of earth, Sarasothi was worried whether water would remain in the barrage.

'You are foolish, Sarasothi,' said Parothi, watching her concern. ' Why are you worried in spring itself? There is still a month to go before we plant paddy in seed beds. Won't it rain by God's grace, a couple of times at least? It usually rains at the time of Yugadi,' she said consolingly.

The sisters-in-law transported the cucumbers home. There were a couple of ash gourds in the backyard. They were bundled up and tied to the pillars and hung. Even then, around a hundred were left over. Sarasothi didn't want them to roll around on the ground and rot. It struck her that they could be sold wholesale. They might fetch a good price at the Kundapura market but who could take them so far?

However, she mentioned it to Soora and who knows why, he spoke of it to Govinda Maniya. He was going to Kundapura the following Saturday. She arranged to send everything with him. She made it a condition that she wanted sweet potato instead of money. By the next Sunday Govind Maniya had sold them and brought back sweet potato, though it might have been a little less than what she wanted. After the sweet potato arrived, happala had to be made. Urad and avadé had to be ground. Pumpkins from the backyard had to be accounted for. They should be mixed with urad to prepare sandigé. It would be better if pickles could be ready by the time seed beds were to be prepared. Those everyday activities belonged to a woman's world. After Makara Sankranthi, Rama Aithala went from house to house endlessly for some marriage, Shanthi or Samaradhané. It was not that his feet would be burnt in the midday sun. Early in the morning, he would reach the houses where he had to perform priestly duties. He would reach the other places in the afternoon, just in time for lunch. He had no fixed time for dinner. So he would arrive home late at night.

All through the month of Phalguna, Parothi and Sarasothi carried on with the making of happala and sandigé. Would

work progress if only the two of them had to wash and dry the grain and do the grinding as well? In between, everyday jobs had to be done. Even when there was no milk, cattle had to be looked after. In all the commotion, it was not possible to make pickles at all. Aithala did not have his own mango trees, so mangoes had to be procured from somewhere or the other. That year, there was an unseasonal gathering of clouds and no tree in the neighbourhood had any unripe fruit. But if there were no pickles, what could be used as relish during the rainy season? For the time being, boiled cucumber pickle was made. That got over. Then it was boiled jackfruit pickle. Even that was fast depleting. Thus it became pretty difficult to make the pickles last through summer.

One day Sarasothi started thinking deeply. Soora arrived. 'Soora, no pickles at all this summer,' she said.

'These brahmins love eating tasty things. Do we live just by eating pickles?' he asked laughingly.

'That's right, Soora. If you come and ask for boiled bran-water, you will be disappointed if we give you plain water, won't you?' Parothi asked, joining in.

'That's quite true. If there is a little bit of pickle, you can eat up two measures of rice. But who ever saw pickle-mangoes this year? Is there any news of this cold weather staying on till Shivarathri? I went to the east at the time of Makara Sankranthi. It was only there that a blanket was needed at night. It's only our town that is so hot. The sky is full of clouds day and night. That was why all the mango flowers melted away.'

'Soora, won't there be any mangoes in the east?'

'There is no dearth of pickles in the east. It is sure to be there somewhere or the other. Who will even bother to smell it? Wherever you turn, there are mangoes growing wild. But how can you bring them home? Wouldn't that mean walking for miles and miles?'

Sarasothi remembered seeing ever so many trees a long time ago a little to the east of her husband's home. She thought

that she could get as many mangoes as she wanted if she got there. Eventually, she was able to cajole Soora and his wife and decided to go there after promising to give them rice. She got up the very next morning and started off with them. They were at Barakooru when morning broke. They went on for some more miles towards the northeast and went around hills. Their reckoning wasn't futile. They hooked and pulled down as many mangoes as they could carry. Trees without owners. Mangoes aplenty, which would be rejected even by monkeys when they ripened.

By the time their job was over, it was almost midday. With bundles on their heads, sweating and panting, they went looking for a brahmin house. In the blast of heat, they lost their way and after a lot of wandering around, they came right back to where they had collected mangoes. They cursed that place, walked westwards a little and saw a house nearby. They put down their bundles in the yard and borrowed a pot. They drew water from the well, washed their faces and saved some for drinking. Looking at their reddened faces, the householders felt sorry for them and gave them some jaggery.

'Soora, first drink some water. I have brought with me some beaten rice. If we soak and eat it we will feel as if we've had a meal,' Sarasothi advised. Water was drunk and very soon, soaked beaten rice was also eaten. They even slept awhile in the covered yard. Sarasothi was anxious when they woke up. 'It is evening and there is no moonlight either. Soora, wake up!' she said, rousing his wife as well. As they started off with the load on their heads, they found it impossible to keep their feet on the ground. The load on the head and the heat on the ground – each mile became longer that it really was. They walked and walked, felt exhausted, drank water wherever they found it and reached Saasthana somehow or the other by nightfall. They had yet to cover three more miles to reach home. Soora, unable to bear the exhaustion, said jokingly that they had been pickled themselves. Everyone laughed. 'Soora,' said Sarasothi to console him, 'I shall give you a small pot of pickles. After eating it, you will be ahead of me next year in going eastwards to gather mangoes.'

Soora laughed. 'That's only if I'm alive till next year,' he said in reply.

'Why do you say that?' Sarasothi asked. Soora's wife replied, 'That's right, Amma. Is it enough to just have pickles? Isn't rice needed for a meal? For those who are able to eat jackfruits and sweet potatoes when rain starts, pickles mean nothing.'

'Are you saying that it will be the same this year? You cultivate fields that will give you two measures of rice. Won't you get at least three more measures than last year?'

Soora gave an account of his income from working in the fields. 'All that remains for the children of the poor, after leases are paid off, is mere straw.' Eventually, Sarasothi did accept that leasing rates were very high in the west coast.

Realising that if they kept talking, dawn would break, they started walking.

It was quite late in the night when they reached home. When they put their load down, they felt as if they had been freed from rigorous imprisonment. Sarasothi craned her neck and called out to Parothi to give some jaggery and water to Soora. 'They must be fed up with the idea of mangoes and pickles. Why only them? I too feel the same way,' she said.

After being offered cooling food and drink, Soora went home with his wife. Sarasothi enquired whether her brother had come home. ' Who knows when he will be back. He didn't say anything when he left. He just went off swinging his arms,' said Parothi.

'This brother of mine considers the women folk at home as so much trash, What does he lose if he tells us where he is going and when he will be back?'

'Sarasothi, you go and bathe. Your body must be numb after carrying all those mangoes. Shall I heat some water? Hot water is good for body-ache. You eat some chatti after you bathe. I wondered whether you would eat or not. So I ground urad dal, put in some chopped kesuvé and made chatti. I don't know how it tastes!'

'Of course, it will be tasty. If oil is smeared evenly over the pan and chatti is made on it, it will become tasty on its own. Have you eaten or not?'

'I was bored and didn't cook. Two for you and two for me – I have made four. I was waiting for you to arrive so we could eat together. I have finished chanting a hundred Panchakshari and even slept for a while.... You wash your feet and come in. Water has already been filled. I shall just light firewood. Water will be hot in a minute.'

'No hot water, please! In this heat it will be refreshing to bathe in cold water.'

'You can't prevent sweating. But you may catch a cold if you bathe in cold water. If you don't want your water hot you can have it lukewarm at least. It is not so hot right now.'

Saying this, Parothi went to the bathroom with a light in her hand. Sarasothi followed her. Parothi sat feeding dry leaves to the fire while Sarasothi stood nearby, narrating the mango-gathering adventure. 'We must have walked over twenty miles today. That too in the burning sun! We shouted ourselves hoarse saying there are no mangoes for pickles in our villages in the west. Over in the east, even monkeys don't care for them. Cluster after cluster of mangoes! Enough to make the branches break.'

'It's like that in the east. It seems as if the soil itself is different there. Mango, jackfruit, banana – whatever you plant grows very well there. If there was no nuisance of the wretched monkeys, it is just heaven over there.'

'The nuisance of monkeys can be faced somehow, but who can tolerate the nuisance of fever? You are down with it for six months in a year. When I am reminded of the fever, I feel scared. Why did I have to go there obsessed with the idea of mangoes for pickles?

'You are not talking sense, Sarasothi. East or west, it is all the same for fever and disease. If you are fated to suffer from it, you cannot avoid it wherever you go.'

While they chatted, water started boiling instead of getting lukewarm. 'Ayyabba, we never even realised how hot the water had become in the midst of our chatter. Who will fetch water to make it colder? Never mind. It's fine. The skin won't get burnt, anyway,' said Sarasothi as she went straight in for her bath. The very first splash of water on the body made her wince and cry out. Parothi rushed in with two pots of cold water to make the heat bearable.

Bathing was over. There was no break in their conversation even during the bath. Eventually, they went towards the kitchen. Following her rule, Sarasothi hurriedly completed one hundred and eight *'Om Namah Shivaya'* and started devouring chatti made with urad dal and kesuvé leaves. 'Parothi, maybe because it is so tasty, even after eating two, it doesn't seem to have touched even the edge of hunger,' said Sarasothi. By then, Parothi had had her fill and was gulping down water. 'You will not have had lunch either. I am a fool. Why did I count four and make only as many?' She rushed around, washed a little beaten rice in water, put salt and spice into it. 'Shall I grind a couple of green chillies? Or mix some pickle juice with it?'

'Am I Bheema to eat a cartload?' said Sarasothi. Even after saying so, she mixed pickles with the beaten rice and ate to her heart's content. She even had hiccups after eating hot pickles.

Now, the ritual of light refreshment was over. They were about to sleep but the baskets of pickle-mangoes were right there before their eyes. They took them to the river, washed and spread them out in the yard. If they had stayed in baskets, the mangoes would have gone mouldy. If the two of them had even a little enthusiasm left, they might have started preparation for making pickles that very moment. Luckily, they were too tired, and spreading their mats, they lay down to sleep. Sarasothi fell asleep as soon as her body touched the mat. Parothi's mind waited for an answer to a question. 'Should salt for the pickle be bought from the shop or should we boil the river water?' She saw Sarasothi sleeping and thought sympathetically how tired she must have been. She too lay down and slept.

The whole of next day was spent in the business of making pickles. Initially they thought that there was no need to go to the shop and that salt could be made from river water. But they realised that they shouldn't think along those lines when the mangoes lay right before them. So, their store of salt at home was used up.

After the mangoes were salted, Parothi felt as if half her worries about the rainy season were over. However, it was only after pepper and other spices were put in that her worries would completely disappear.

The summer sun started getting hotter. By the time Yugadi was over, the earth would be a frying pan in the afternoon. After Chaithra was over and Vaishakha arrived, what more could one say? The glare of the sun made the sky appear grey from morning till evening. Moreover, white clouds gathered and it was the same whether you were indoors or outdoors — a shower of sweat. At night, however, if a cloth was spread in the backyard and you lay down on the sand hill, a cool breeze would blow and you could sleep a little. In Aithala's house which was surrounded by sand heaps, the heat in the morning was indescribable.

The scorching summer brought other worries to Parothi and Sarasothi. What would happen to their paddy seed beds? However much water they drew for the fields, it would be insufficient. The water in the tank had also dried up and was useful only for fishermen fishing with baskets. Waiting for the rain, the green sprouts wilted and turned brown. Sarasothi in particular would go to the seed beds three or four times everyday in the hot sun. ' The whole village has become a burning ground. We may have to sow powdery seeds during the rainy season. It would have been better if some seeds were left over for sowing at least,' she would say.

It was in such hard days that the thought of home improvement struck Aithala. He had nowhere to go for lunch one day and lay on the cool stone platform in front of the house after the midday meal, cursing the heat. Inebriated with food, he even slept for a while. He yawned, turned towards

the pandal in front of the house, and said 'Sarasothi, what is the point of having a ramshackle thing like that? There is no dearth of coconut fronds in the house. If we run short, we can always borrow a few. We should have a pandal covering the front yard and a shiny floor underneath.'

Sarasothi was half-asleep. 'Anniah, you have no better business, obviously. Is there a thread ceremony or a wedding at home for us to cover the front yard? You keep thinking of some strange thing or the other.' Even before she had finished talking, Rama Aithala stood up yawning and clicking his fingers in front of his mouth. He tied a dhoti around his waist and made a turban from another and wandered all around, front and back, this side and that in the sun. Beads of sweat appeared all over his body. Disregarding it, he looked around for poles and thin bamboo and cane. He pulled them out and made a heap. Sarasothi realised that his commanding words had turned into action. Even before she could muster enough courage to ask why or what, he spoke. 'Sarasothi, go and cut some bhootha parangi fronds.' Not prepared to disobey, both sisters-in-law departed in the sun, carrying choppers. By the time they came back in the evening, not only were palm fronds, cane and other material collected in the yard, but Aithala was also digging holes in the ground with a crowbar in order to erect the poles.

The sea breeze blew as evening fell. ' We shall go and water the seed bed if water has oozed out in the tank. You put water and rice on the boil. I am taking Parothi too,' Sarasothi said, and left. Parothi followed her. Aithala grumbled to himself and carried on working. Moonlight shone from above. One after another he finished the jobs of planting poles in the ground, placing some across and tying cane to the beams of the pandal with ropes. In between he paid a hurried visit to the kitchen. It was quite a few hours before the sisters-in-law came back from watering the seed beds. They were tired and had taken a dip in the hollow that had been dug in the tank. When they came home, the smell of burnt rice was emanating from the kitchen. When they stepped in, they could see that half the rice had been burnt and the other half was not edible.

Sarasothi was angry. 'He seems to be possessed today. What is this pandal work? He has made rice which no one can eat.'

Aithala finished his work and stepped into the tank as usual and bathed. As if to get rid of the fatigue, he started chanting *'Om Namah Shivaya'* in a low tone, raised his voice suddenly and stood still. A wind wafted the smell of the burnt rice towards him and it stung his nostrils. He rushed towards the kitchen and said in a taunting voice, 'Are you cooking food or making offerings to the devil?' Parothi stood saying nothing. Sarasothi too heard his roar. She came out. 'You never paid attention when we told you to mind what is on the fire. What can be done now that the rice is burnt? By the time we came back, the rice was burnt and the offering was ready. The only thing left for us to do is to eat it.'

She didn't stop there. 'But, of course, how can you hear us when you're so involved with the pandal? How can you realise that rice has been burnt? How can you be aware that time is moving on? What do you really want? A pandal! Perhaps government officials are coming to this house for land assessment. Parothi was suffering from leg-pain. Still, she had to come with me to scoop up water. Here you are, erecting a pandal!' Rama Aithala was roused by his sister's retort. He said nothing. Holding on to a pillar, he started chanting ' Rama, Rama. Hari, Hari.'

Sarasothi cooked rice for the second time. She made some gojju, fried sandigé and spread leaves for dinner. Aithala came, ate without a word and went away. His Narasimha Avatara, the angry incarnation, had subsided and he was at the point of collapse. He finished his dinner, drew a pillow and lay down. Sleep and snores promptly came to his aid.

Just there in the yard lay a whole heap of palm fronds. They had to be braided to cover the pandal. The two women finished dinner and sat braiding them, unable to understand what the big brother had in mind. As they worked on sleepily, their exhaustion and tedium were beyond description. But just one conjecture brought them some consolation. 'Probably Rama must have decided to adopt a child. All this showing off must

be for that,' thought Sarasothi. Parothi who could not think of any other reason confirmed it by saying it must be so.

Early in the morning, Aithala woke up coughing. In the dim light of dawn, he tried to gaze at his palms, invoking Goddess Lakshmi and Saraswathi in the morning ritual. Then he came out singing the chant of Gajendra Moksha. He had wanted the palm fronds in the yard to be plaited but there they were, all ready to be put up. He thought he would need more of them, and straightaway went looking for labourers. Dawn had just broken. Nevertheless, he went in front of their houses. 'O, Soora, O, Havuli, O, Kaala! Get some loads of palm fronds from wherever you can get them You will get paddy for it. A grand pandal must be put up,' he announced.

A couple of inquisitive people asked, 'Why do you need them? For a pandal? There must be some feast. Well, God must have written on the foreheads of poor people that they must be treated to payasa from a brahmin household.' 'This is the fate of the Shudras. When you talk of pandals, they start drooling for payasa,' Aithala said with a smile. Well, by the time the sun had risen, Aithala had reached home. Within a couple of hours after sunrise, quite a few braided fronds arrived at his yard. One of those who brought them was asked to lend a hand and he covered the pandal with them. It now looked as beautiful as a wedding pandal. Filled with pleasure, Aithala wanted to give Kaala a treat. 'Woman,' he ordered his wife, 'Give Kaala a pot of water and a couple of pickles.' When Kaala was asked whether he preferred jaggery or pickles, he said, 'Jaggery is available everywhere but it has been quite some time since I had pickles from a brahmin household. The taste of pickles from your house cannot be found in any of the fourteen villages in Kota.' He was all praise.

Parothi brought the newly made mango pickles on a strip of a banana leaf. She placed a pot of water on front of Kaala. He emptied it in just a minute as if possessed by a devil. 'Amma, how lovely the water is! Pour me some more. One can do without food in summer but a man cannot live without water.' He had more water brought, finished off the

pickles and gazed at Parvathamma's face. 'Amma, give a poor man a few pickles in a coconut shell. I shall have a meal in the afternoon in your name,' he said. Parothi knew that Kaala's services could not be paid off with money. She wanted to clear her debt to him. Not wanting to give him newly made pickles, she gave him some out of a pot, in a folded banana leaf. Luckily, Kaala didn't unfold it then and there to say that it wasn't the same pickle he had just eaten.

After ordering water for Kaala, Aithala had gone off for a bath. He came back from a dip and thought of payment for his services. Kaala hadn't come expecting rice in return for his work. ' Why rice for some piece work?' he asked.

Aithala spoke to his wife, but his words were directed at Kaala. 'How can that be? If he doesn't want money, let him take paddy for the fronds he has brought.'

Kaala was intelligent as well! 'Amma, I want neither paddy nor anything else. If you give me back the fronds after the work is over, that is enough. Tomorrow or the day after, if and whenever God wills, feed us payasa.' When she heard Kaala say payasa, Parothi thought that all the excitement must be for the Upanayana during the adoption ceremony. She was not one to ask her husband what it was all about. She told Sarasothi what Kaala had said.

Sarasothi's mind would harden at times. She felt that the Shudra of the village would get to know of the festivity or Shanthi to be performed at home but there was no one to inform those who slaved away day and night in the house. If she were to ask her brother directly, she was sure he would retort, without thinking twice, that women were fond of gossip. Both Parothi and Sarasothi decided firmly that they should not let Aithala speak to them like that.

By the time all the pandal work was over and lunch was eaten after bathing, it was late afternoon. As if not to waste the sun, Aithala wound a green turban around his head, stuffed a snuff box into his waist and stepped out into the yard with an umbrella in hand. He took a pinch of snuff and snorted it

noisily. 'Look after the house. I shall not be home for three days. Right? By the time I get back, the floor should be like a mirror, a mirror, a mirror ... Sarasothi, did you say she had leg-pain? Tell Soora's wife or Kaala's daughter to come. Let her just lie down. Or, instead of that, she can gather some greens. It would have been good to rub the floor with avadé leaves. But where can you get them now? It will be fine if something else is used to polish the floor.'

'All right, you may go. The job in the yard will be done somehow. But should you set out in this terrible sun?' Sarasothi asked. Aithala should have got furious for being spoken to at the time of leaving. Somehow, he kept quiet. 'Is this sun anything to bother about? Perhaps the ground will be hot till I cross the beach. The edge of the sea will be wet,' he said and crossed the eastern fence, walked north and turned towards the sea. Leaping over the fence to ensure that the timing was auspicious and the direction right, he disappeared.

Sarasothi called Parothi. 'As if we don't understand at all! That's why this pandal! He must be feeling a little awkward to say that he is going in for adoption after saying no when we suggested it to him. That's why he has crossed the river, gone across the beach and is headed towards Thonsé or some other place. Where is he getting the baby from?'

'He said he wouldn't be back before three days,' Parothi said.

'Perhaps he has some wedding to attend to. Ayyo, this Anna considers the women of the household as trash. He needs us to polish the floor and make it shine like a mirror. But he doesn't tell us why he wants it so,' Sarasothi said in disgust.

They had no rest after that. There were just three days to go. They had to go after dark soil and red soil to redden the floor. Where could they get all that and who would accompany them, was all they thought about....

~5~

The burden of getting the front yard ready fell on Sarasothi's shoulders. But what about Parothi? Though it was true that her husband had ordered her to do nothing, was it possible that she would do nothing? If the yard had to shine like a mirror, it had to be an auspicious occasion like a wedding or Upanayana. But shouldn't happala and sandigé be kept ready to suit the occasion? Would the usual everyday stuff do? The thought troubled Parothi a great deal. As soon as he left home, she asked Sarasothi how much urad dal had to be put out for drying and how much paddy had to be taken out. 'He didn't say how much was needed, who should be called, how many people were expected and what the festivity was about. Why should you be bothered about it? Just do what you were asked to do,' she replied. Parothi said, 'No matter how indifferent he is, is there any way that we can ignore what happens in our household?' Not having found a way out, they discussed the number of people who could be accommodated in the hall and came to the decision that it could hold about two to three hundred. But that wasn't much use when they didn't know what it was all about. However, they came to the conclusion that they would need happala and sandigé for about a thousand meals at least.

They thought of asking for help from the neighbouring teacher's wife Akkamma. 'Yes, she can be called. She can pound, grind and make happala in a minute. But what can I say if she asks what it is for?' asked Sarasothi. Parothi's face fell. She felt it would be just a way of letting neighbours know how inconsequential they were in their own house.

Sarasothi's dam of peace breached. She thought of their position in their house and reproached her brother with no holds barred. ' Parothi, I have nothing else to do. He himself has said that you should rest. I shall finish the work in the yard because I promised. Why should we bother too much? If he wanted happala and sandigé, he should have said so. Maybe

we have a few more days to make them in. Maybe he has just laid the foundation now for something that may happen some time in the future. Anyway, he has said he will come back in three days Maybe he will. We will attend to them after he tells us.' Though she said all that, her mind was boiling with dissatisfaction. She had realised that a woman would never in her life receive respect.

The next day, Sarasothi called Soora and his wife to rake the yard. Amidst the work, a thought struck her. She called Parothi who was sitting inside. ' Parothi, somehow I have a longing to see my family. I should have gone at the time of the Saligrama chariot festival. It is three years since I went there. It is not right that I do not see them at all. They do send enough rice for my meals. I shall go for a day and come back. I may even stay for a few days if I like it. Ever since Anna left home, I keep thinking about that house,' she said.

They somehow finished the work in the yard within three days. Kaala's wife and daughter came and helped them make the ground look really nice. Aithala's yard did shine like a mirror. Sarasothi felt that with the job in the yard completed, her work was also done.

Everyone stopped working when evening was about to set in. Sarasothi stretched herself to ease her backache, yawned, clicking her fingers and went towards the tank for a bath. As soon as she came back, she took out the narumadi, worn while going out on special occasions. 'Parothi, don't ask me why. I have done what Anna asked me to do. He may come home at night. He will not agree to my going away just as he comes home. I will not feel comfortable listening to his long stories. I am leaving now. I shall come back as soon as I can. If I need to come back earlier, let him send for me.' Sarasothi stepped into the yard. Parothi's lips trembled and her heart felt heavy. But she took courage and said, ' Sarasothi, you seem to be angry with him. Why? What does a woman get in any house? What happiness will you gain if you go now to that house? Let him come. Go after that. If even after coming back, he doesn't say why the pandal has been put up you may go.'

The answer did come with a little stiff anger. Sarasothi spoke in sorrow and agitation, her jaws tight. 'Parothi, don't say anything. You may be scared of him. I am under no obligation to anyone. The minute my father gave me away in marriage, my connection with this household was severed. I came here because he was my brother after all. I did not come just for a few morsels. What I am given is enough for me. After my God left, my father-in-law has never told me not to stay there. I have never asked for the rice he gives me – he gives it of his own will. I felt like staying with my brother. I had no children, so why would I stay on there? This was my brother and we belonged together. I came here because I trusted him, but he holds me in contempt. We should work like dogs. If we need to know why the pandal was put up, we need to ask the labourers or the neighbours. Is that not so?' All these words flowed out like a flood of water. Even Parothi did not have the courage to stop her. Sarasothi went away, swinging her arms. Unable to say anything, Parothi followed her. They looked as if they were on their way to scoop up water for the cucumber patch.

The field came into view, and so did the edge of the field behind the cucumber patch at the back. Parothi remembered that in the commotion of the past three days the backyard hadn't been watered at all. 'Sarasothi, the cucumber creepers have all wilted. We should have watered them the day before yesterday. It wasn't done even yesterday.'

'I belong to one family and the master of this backyard belongs to another. I have nothing to do with him. I stayed with him as long as I felt indebted to him. That was something that connected us. Now I am leaving,' said Sarasothi, moving on without turning back. Parothi followed like a shadow. The river crossing lay ahead. The ebbing water was rushing to the sea. As Parothi watched, Sarasothi stepped into the water and crossed the river. After she crossed over, she turned back, 'Parothi, everything is a bond from the previous birth. Why are you standing there? Go home,' she said and walked on. She walked on ahead as if she had snapped all family ties.

Parothi stood petrified. But for her wet cheeks, she was a statue of stone. Who knew how long she stood there without moving? She must have stood there until Sarasothi had become a dot over the field across the river and disappeared. ' She's gone' Parothi exclaimed. Pinching the sprig of the chungi plant that was at hand, she sobbed as the thorns pricked her. Her mind was like an empty sky. In the half-lit twilight where the setting sun and a few stars were visible, her mind was spread out wide and flat like a field.

The western sky reddened, the colour faded gradually and all human forms looked like shadows. Kaala's wife Pommi came there looking for a calf that hadn't come home. She saw Parvathamma standing there motionless.

'Amma, what are you thinking about? Are you waiting for Sarasothamma? Has she gone to collect grass?' But did Parothi even see Pommi, let alone hear her? Pommi went forward wondering whether if was indeed Parvathamma. Surely it was Amma. Her cheeks were glistening with tears. Pommi got anxious. 'Amma, why are you sad? What has happened that makes you stand here at this time, crying?

Parothi's reverie was broken. It was as though she had suddenly awakened from sleep. She remembered all the incidents that had come to pass. She thought of going home since it was late. Looking back, she saw Pommi. 'Is that Kaala's wife? Why did you come here?' she asked.

'One of the calves didn't come home and I came here looking for it. I saw you standing here, thinking. I talked to you but you didn't recognise me at all.'

'Did you talk to me?'

'Yes, Amma. Amma seems to be thinking a lot.'

Seeing that there was no further response, she forgot about her calf. 'Amma, go home now. It is getting late. The moon will rise late tonight. Something or the other might crawl across our path. Let's go.'

'You go and look for your calf. I shall go home. It is dark indeed.'

'Where can I hope to see the calf at this hour? It will return some time at night or in the morning. Come, let's go home.' It was only then that Parothi moved. Pommi walked behind her. Parothi didn't talk, nor did Pommi. Seeing Parothi reach the yard of her house, Pommi turned back and went home.

Parothi reached home. She wasn't even aware that Pommi had followed her all the way. Depressed, she lit a lamp in the front yard and sat before it with her prayer beads. For the first few moments she chanted *'Om namah Shivaya.'* Her lips moved in tune with the chanting. The prayer beads went up and down on her fingers. Later, the voice subsided. Only the prayer beads moved. After a few more minutes even the beads became still. Her eyes were fixed on the flame of the lamp, and beads of another kind poured down her cheeks.

Dull moonlight fell on the courtyard of Aithala's house. The moon, like a buffalo calf which had drunk gruel, debated whether he should move on or not. He had almost finished his run across the sky. A little more, and he would disappear. Why should he travel on? What would be lost if he just stopped moving, like a buffalo calf chewing the cud? Anyway, the world didn't depend on him. Did the earth stop moving on the nights he wasn't there? If, in the world, the sun was the husband, the moon would be the wife. The household would stand still without the husband. There would be no disturbance if the wife wasn't there. The moon must have thought so. Perhaps he saw Parothi's sorrow and started thinking along those lines. Who knows?

The moon's travel progressed like that of an animal caught in the wheel of a chariot. He swam through the thin blanket of clouds to hide at the edge of the western sea. Without being aware of it, he moved on passively like a mere piece of wood in the flood waters. Eventually, he became a flickering light. Finally, he just went off in the horizon like a house-lamp without oil.

The lamp did go out. Even the lamp in front of Parothi was extinguished for lack of oil. Though the wick burned out

and smoke arose, Parothi didn't sense the smell at all. When the wick glowed red and then stopped burning, she woke up suddenly and realised that it had burnt out. But she didn't think of adding oil, lighting the lamp again or cooking dinner. Let it go out, she thought. There was moonlight outside. How could she realise in her sleep that the lamp within had gone out even before the one outside had? She lay down indifferently near the lamp. Though her hand hit the lamp, she didn't consider moving the lamp aside a little.

At the same time, Aithala could be heard calling at the gate of the fence. 'Sheena, you will come in the morning, won't you? You know, except for me, there's no male – not even a male worm – in the household. There's only her; then there's my sister. How much can they do? So, Sheena, you must imagine that you are the master of the house for the next eight days. ' He was talking to the neighbour, Sheena Mayya. They had just arrived together. Sheena was taking leave of Aithala at the door. Aithala entered the tank, washed his feet, and called out directions to Sheena once again. Sheena replied, 'Of course, I'll do it. It isn't as if I have any other work. We will have a grand wedding. We will make people say that there is no sweet better than the sukkinundé in a brahmin wedding.'

'Didn't I say you were in charge of everything? You are like Karna being crowned and given charge of the army. Sukkinundé and vadé are for death anniversaries. It could be kayi holigé or chilumé laadu. Let it be grand. I shouldn't look small before the people of Padumunnooru.'

Parothi was suddenly awakened by the war-trumpet voice of Aithala. ' Where is the lamp? Has it gone out?' she wondered as she got up. She was still sleepy. She stumbled towards the kitchen and started looking for a box of matches. She looked beside the stove, and the shelf above it. Disappointed, she felt along the other door beam. She found the matchbox and, taking out a stick, she scratched it alight on the floor and took it to the lamp. The lamp, which had no oil, refused to burn. She wandered around again to get the oil, poured it into the lamp in the dark, and ended up bathing the lamp with half the oil.

'Ayyo, my wretched sleep!' she cursed as she lit the lamp. Amidst that half-awareness, she had heard the voice of her husband and Sheena Mayya. Hearing talk about holigé, chilumé laadu and grand celebrations, she stepped into the yard and towards the gate of the fence. Aithala and Sheena were carrying on with their telegraphic messages.

'All right then. Go and sleep. I am also tired from walking,' Aithala issued an order from the river bank.

In reply, Sheena answered from the corner near his home. 'Whatever one may say, Aithala is a rascal! No information for anyone until everything is settled. The pandal in the yard is already looking grand. But then, Aithalaré, the wedding may be fixed but what about the arrangements for happala and sandigé?'

'That's nothing, really, Sheena. If I tell Sarasothi, she will do it in a minute. It'll all be over in a day. And there's plenty of hot sunshine to dry them.'

A telegraphic message came yet again. 'Aithalaré, no one can say the girl is from Shivalli. She looks exactly like someone from Kota. If she wears kumkuma across her forehead instead of drawing a line, it is impossible to say she is not from Kota.'

'Ayyo, Sheena! Do you consider Madappa Adiga from Padumunnooru a Shivalli man? His great grandfather was from Shanadi, his bride from Shivalli. Later, they faced bad times and left Shanadi for Padumunnooru. Since everyone around is from Shivalli, she draws her kumkuma in a line. The people there call them Kota Shivalli! Anyway, an alliance with them is acceptable. Isn't that so, Sheena?'

'It is pure gold, unadulterated. Anyway, I must say I was looked after very well. You were the son-in-law, and I was only your friend. Nevertheless, I must say that I have not seen such hospitality anywhere. Everything was of a high standard. You are an expert in choosing the fish before you bait it. It is good that you found someone to match your age. Anyway, what decisions were made about jewellery?'

'I never bargained about gold or anything else. I don't even care about such things. Whether they give anything or not, the girl herself is pure gold. God willing, they might put a necklace round her neck. They will never send her with bare hands and ears.'

'Aithalaré, why did you think of marriage so late instead of deciding to marry when you knew you couldn't have a child by your wife?'

'Why not now? Has my beard grown grey? Am I toothless? Look, Sheena, I am not so keen even now. But our Sarasothi keeps on insisting that I adopt a child. I don't like that idea very much. Is it possible to bring a wild flower from some house and turn it into a kedigé flower in our house? A wild flower is a wild flower and a kedigé is a kedigé. It is best to have one's own child to pour Gange water into the mouth at the time of death. If an adopted son does it, it won't be much of a heaven. That's why I started thinking about this. I am just around forty or forty-two.'

'Aithalaré, don't be absurd! When our Hanumaithala from Handatti got married for the third time, he was over fifty. He has three children by his third wife. It was just the other day that he lost his front teeth. Otherwise, didn't he have the strength to lift a measure of rice with his teeth?'

'Hanumaithala belongs to our family. But can I match him? I can't eat half the amount of rice that he can.'

'Aithalaré, it is good that your Parothi has agreed to this.'

'Sheena, you don't know the system of arbitration we have in our house. Among us, it is one and only one master. The husband saying one thing and the wife saying something else – that has never happened in our family till now. It is not like our Padukeré Parama's household – husband and wife fighting all morning and spreading the news everywhere. As far as such things are concerned, our Parothi is a real Seetadevi. The only thing lacking in her is that God did not will her any children. Apart from that, what do I lack? You tell me. Just

watch – when that girl comes here, Parothi will look after her like her own daughter.'

'Aithalaré, please go now. Morning will break while we keep on talking. I have just remembered that I forgot to water the seed bed. I followed you and totally forgot. There's no way out except to do it in the morning.'

'Sheena, don't come late in the morning just because you have to water the seed bed. I am depending on you. There is so much to be done.'

'Why are you so bothered? Is it enough if I arrive at your doorstep at sunrise? Who should be invited, what needs to be brought from Kundapura market, what clothes need to be bought – you think about such things all night and make a list. We will make it a grand affair. Don't worry.'

So saying, Sheena disappeared into the house and Aithala went into the tank and started doing Sandhyavandané, his evening prayers..

Parothi stood in the yard listening to everything. From their conversation and the topic they were discussing, a big new world appeared before her. In the beginning she thought they were talking about someone else's marriage. Eventually, she grew certain that another wife of Aithala would arrive home.

Even as she was being tossed about among waves of resignation and disquiet, the doubt whether the girl was from Shivalli or Kota struck her as well. Couldn't he find someone from among the real Kota people? Was it acceptable for brahmins in their arrogance to bring brides from among incompatible people? She was troubled. Her sequence of thought was broken when she remembered her husband telling Sheena that Sarasothi would make happala and sandigé very quickly. She was perturbed because she had listened to Sarasothi and not dried urad dal. Then she clearly remembered that Sarasothi had left. She was bewildered. How could she tell her husband about the new-sprung commotion? It was true that her body stood like a pillar in the yard. But her mind was tossed about

like the sea in the month of Asadi. In truth, it was for her the new moon day in Ashada and her ears seemed to be filled with the roar of the sea in full tide. Even when Aithala stood in front of her after finishing his prayers, she was hardly aware of anything.

He too was bewildered. He mustered enough courage and roared, 'Is that you? Maybe, you stood listening to everything. This is the fate of women – standing and listening with sharp ears to what men say. I don't know when you will get rid of this irksome habit.' As he went forward, his feet felt cold, as if he had stepped on a snake. He took another step and it felt the same. Suddenly he smiled. The yard had been polished. They might even have rubbed some greens on it. Never mind. They had done that much at least. He found some satisfaction in the midst of his annoyance.

He was happy also when he reached the verandah. 'Sarasothi, you are god-like. The floor is good,' he said, and unrolled a mat.' How many people worked on it? Poor soul, your bones must have cracked. You must be sleeping somewhere. Why should I wake you up? Never mind. You go to sleep,' he said with concern.

He did indeed bring up Sarasothi's name. But he didn't know that she wasn't there. Parothi thought that he should be told about it and went to where he lay on a mat. Aithala heard her and bellowed, 'Is that you? Can't you at least keep a lamp burning in the front of the house?' She went in a rush to get the lamp from inside. ' What good is the lamp now, after I have spread the mat and lain down? Everything here is like pickles which do not come with the meal.'

Parothi went back wearily to place the lamp at a distance and started sighing. Aithala realised how she must feel. 'Oh, maybe what I said hurt your dignity. It is not wrong for you to listen to what men folk say, but my scolding you was too much, wasn't it? Abba, in this household, if you say something once, it is not understood. Saying it twice would be too much. What shall I do?' he said.

'I wasn't saying anything about that.'

'What were you talking about, then? My legs are aching after walking so far. I am sleepy. Moreover, I need to get up early in the morning. There are a thousand jobs to finish. It is all a joke for you.'

Parothi stiffened at those words which meant nothing to her. She felt that he was getting angry with her for no reason. 'I don't need any favours. You talked about your sister. You said happala and sandigé. That's is why I came to tell you....'

'That you can't do it? It can be made elsewhere. That would be the right thing. Go and sleep now. '

'What are we in your eyes? You scold us without rhyme or reason. Your sister finished the work in the yard and went off to Mandarthi in the evening.' She gave him that much information and went off towards the kitchen in order to prevent another Ramayana.

Aithala was alarmed. He thought that there had been some upheaval and his sister must have left in anger. Didn't he know that nothing could be done the next day without her? He sat up in panic and called, ' Woman!' The woman didn't come at all. 'How can I run a household with you people? ' he thought and got up from his bed to go to where Parothi was sleeping. 'Don't torture me by telling only half of what happened. I am not capable enough of knowing that you mean sukkinundé when you just say su.... Why did she go? What happened to her? Did you have a fight? I now know what happens at home when I am not there for a moment.'

'We didn't fight. Whatever has been done, we are the sinners, aren't we? You are honourable and I am the sinner. Does that satisfy you?'

'What happened, maharayathi? Tell me that.'

'Nothing much. You talked about the pandal. You said the floor had to be polished. You said nothing about why this had to be done. She went away angry because she felt that she was needed only to work like a donkey but not to know why. It didn't appear from the way she left that she would be back soon. She didn't shut her eyelids for two or three nights. She cried, saying that she was just some trash in this house.'

What had to be said was said. Parothi, bearing the weight of her sister-in-law's sorrow, kept crying. But was Aithala considerate enough to pay attention to it? At that moment, he was at a loss as to what he was supposed to do. He was well aware that his household was totally lost without his sister. If people came to know that she had left home, there would be a lot of commotion. He remembered bragging to Sheena just a little while ago that he was master of the house.

As these thoughts came rushing into his mind, he could also hear Parothi crying. Aithala felt helpless. 'What can I do if you keep on making music like this? Why do you weep as if the worry of her leaving is not enough?' he said, going towards his mat. He didn't feel like sitting down. 'Let this household be set on fire!' he cursed and went into the backyard. He gathered some fibre and coconut fronds, bundled them up to make a torch, and went to where Parothi lay in order to light it with the lamp. 'I am going to Mandarthi,' he said, 'Stop your music at least until I come back. The least you can do is not join hands with others in bringing dishonour to me.' So saying, he went out of the house.

Aithala's long legs moved fast. The hands that held the torch swung fast as well.

Parothi sat up with a strained face after her husband left home at midnight. 'Who knows what he will say and how she might answer? If he gets angry and she is obdurate, they will not get together in this life. Who knows what they will do?' she thought. She was fed up. What could she do? 'Whatever God wills will happen,' she thought philosophically. She put out the light and lay down. She tossed about on the mat for a long time but couldn't go to sleep at all.

Out there, Aithala moved on, crossing field after field. He took three hours to walk about nine miles. Barked at by dogs all along the way, he reached the edge of Barakooru. Somehow or the other, he reached the house of his sister's mother-in-law. Even their dogs started barking at the sound of footsteps. Aithala swore at them heartily and knocked on the door. Someone opened the front door. Lamps were lit to find

out who it was. On learning that it was Aithala, a whole assembly gathered. Aithala talked and talked around the issue and said that he had come at midnight since the wedding was imminent. He won his sister over with his colourful talk and took the path of night-walker again, this time with his sister. She did not utter a word on the way back. All the eloquence was Aithala's. He created an entire Mahabharatha, comprising what was real and what was imagined, to compensate for not having said anything till then. Sarasothi might or might not have understood everything. But it must have been some consolation to her that she had managed to dent her brother's arrogance at least once.

When both reached home, Soora's cock crowed. When Sarasothi looked back, the sky was already aglow. Both washed their feet in the tank. 'I am tired, after all this. A little sleep would have been good.'

'You go and sleep,'

'What will you do in the dark?'

'There is no darkness. Didn't you hear the cock crow? The sun has risen as well. I shall see what needs to be done in the morning.'

Parothi woke up suddenly. Sarasothi's voice made her a hundred times stronger. 'God didn't abandon me after all,' she said. Getting out of bed quickly to welcome Sarasothi, she remembered what had been said the night before. Words of men were not to be believed. She immediately went back to bed. She woke up again only when Sarasothi came and asked whether she was still asleep.

~ 6 ~

Rama Aithala's house was like a choultry that fortnight, like a mixture of a shandy and Kambala, the outdoor race of buffaloes. The noise of people coming and going, the loud belching of those that had eaten – it was deafening. House management was in Sheena Mayya's hands at least until the celebration was over. As promised at midnight, he had watered the seed bed early in the morning and presented himself at Aithala's house. Sheena's voice was the kind that would make a pregnant woman abort. His wife had also arrived with him for supervision. If she spoke even softly, her words could be heard for three hundred yards. All those people were in the habit of speaking above the roar of the sea. When that was so, it was natural that there would be noise when Aithala's house was full of people. Moreover, even though there were eight or ten people, it would give the impression to passersby that a thousand might be present.

What if Aithala had become a bridegroom? The wedding was still four days away. Who would go to houses to invite those who were really close? Sheena or someone else could be sent to faraway places. But he had to put aside his modesty and himself go to people who were close to him, and for whom he was the priest. Though Sheena Mayya was given the status of head of the household, it was imperative that he himself bear the responsibility. One thing was true – though people guessed as much when they saw the grandeur of the pandal, the news that Aithala was marrying again had blown like the wind from the east bank to the west, thanks to the lightning negotiations of the night before. If Aithala took the akshathé to his friends, they would straightaway say, 'Yes, we will come.' If they asked when was the muhurtha, he could say that he would let them know later.

Anyway, Aithala went to fulfil his duties. There was the same type of welcome everywhere. Though there wasn't much time to chat, he would say that he was not very particular

about marrying again. But his sister had been stubborn and said that there was no salvation without a son. He would add spice to the tale and give reasons for the wedding, as if to clear his own doubts. Since the people of Padumunnooru were at a great distance, he would explain who they were to make them appear very close. 'They are really from Kota. They just lived among the Shivalli community. Do you know how strictly religious and devoted they are? By God's grace, they are quite well off. Countless coconut trees, honné, mango trees and jackfruit. Padumunnooru is the place in the east for all amenities.'

He met some older people in some of the houses he visited. They still remembered Aithala's first marriage. 'O Rama,' they said, 'Your father celebrated your marriage during the rainy season so that no one would dare venture near the place. You are going off to Vada Pandeshwara and Padumunnooru so that lame and old people like us cannot make it to the wedding.' Aithala didn't hold back words of hospitality. 'Chee, chee, it's not so far. If you sit in a boat here, won't one gust of wind blow it to Thonsé? Their house is not too far from there. No one should stay back on the pretext of it being too far.'

Aithala, who had left home in the morning, came home in the evening after going round the world inviting all the householders he needed to. Within moments of Aithala's leaving home, Sheena Mayya put a few gunny sacks on his head and went off to Kundapura for the Saturday shandy. He filled up a cart with sweet potato, tamarind, chillies and this and that, and reached Hangarakatté at midnight. From there, he took a boat and reached the vicinity of Aithala's house and woke all those who were sleeping by shouting 'Soora, Kaala' and transported all the stuff to the pandal. It was early morning by then. 'Never mind if sleep is lost. What is gained by sleeping for a little while?' he thought. Calling Aithala, he started off his chatter. The shandy was described in detail. There was then the narration of how he accomplished the feat of buying costly items for less than half the price; how the accursed ox slowed down three times; how he couldn't find a single boat

when he came to Hangarakatté and had to scream and shout, hurting his throat. Everything was duly described. Then there was the matter of what needed to be done. Who had been invited already, he wanted to know. Where did he have to go? He could go to Manooru, Padukeré, Kodi, Kanya – the villages by the sea. He was confident of being back for lunch the next morning.

Sheena Mayya wasn't content with having lost his sleep. 'Sarasothamma, you do remember happala and sandigé, I hope. At least a thousand happalas will be needed. The bridegroom's people don't always incur a lot of expense, true, but when you're talking of special festivities, won't there be at least six hundred people to be fed? Some may not go there because of the distance but no one will stay away from the dinner hosted here. Two big meals. Even for daily meals, people crowd together like ants at Aithala's.'

'Avalakki and ground urad have been prepared. Happala can be rolled out and sandigé will be prepared before the evening is over. That's not too much to do,' said Sarasothi. Sheena Mayya started singing her praises to her brother. 'Sheena Mayya,' Sarasothi said, 'Find out from Anna if he has thought about jewellery. If we talk to him, he may say it is none of our business. Whatever gold they may give, shouldn't we at least give a pair of bangles, a black-bead necklace, thali and a gold-bead necklace? Though he has fixed up the wedding in three days, should these not be made?'

Agreeing with her, he went off to Aithala. 'Aithalaré, going there barehanded doesn't suit our status. We must take at least as much jewellery as Sarasothamma mentioned. Black beads, thali, a gold-bead necklace, a pair of bangles – this much at least. Definitely.'

'Yes, Sheena. I am not as stupid as Sarasothi thinks. When I went out to invite people yesterday, I caught hold of goldsmith Gunda, bought gold and directed him to make everything ready by afternoon day after tomorrow,' said Aithala.

'Sheena Mayya, Anna doesn't like telling women anything.'

'Don't say things that aren't true, Sarasothi. I can understand you saying that if there was enough time to talk and act. As soon as I brought you back from Mandarthi, I bathed and went off. You tell me, where was the time for all this idle talk? If you don't have the sense to understand what is important and what isn't, what can I do?'

'Never mind. That's over. But this?'

'What?'

'Should your Parothi come to the wedding or not?'

'What are you saying? Did I think of marrying again because I didn't want her anymore? I just hoped that God might grant me a son so that she might acquire salvation, and so might I....'

'I wasn't talking of that. If she comes, can she come with nothing on her arms and neck? What gold ornaments have you got made for her? Shouldn't at least half of what is being made for the one who is coming here be made for her? Wouldn't the ladies who come for the wedding look for gold on her as well?'

'Sarasothi, I never thought about making or not making ornaments, but shouldn't there be a proper time for these things? How much can be made when there are just two days for the wedding?'

'That's true. Very true. If what has to be given is kept ready, the other can be made at leisure.'

'Moreover, it is the same whether it is made or not. She has never asked for gold till today. She hasn't asked now either. But shouldn't I have thought of it? Listen, it should do if I borrow five seers of gold from Holla's house. All right?

'Yes, of course. The people who come there will not have eyes sharp enough to know whether it is new or not.'

Aithala was unable to face Sarasothi's arguments. He was willing to show off before the bride's people but not willing to be extravagant. He was certain of one thing. It was all the

same whether Parothi was loaded with gold or not. But he did not have the courage to say so. He knew that if Sarasothi abandoned him, half the game would be over. So he stared at Sheena Mayya speechlessly. Sheena knew how to say the right thing at the right time, and went to arbitrate. 'Aithalaré, do this : go and get the jewellery that you want from Holla. Ask goldsmith Gunda to polish them to make them look like new.'

'But won't we have to soon return the gold that is borrowed, Sheena Mayyaré?' Aithala raised an objection. Sheena had a ready answer. 'The rainy season will start after the wedding. Gunda has neither work to do nor land to cultivate. If you give him a little gold, he will go on working on it. My plan was for just the two days of the wedding.'

Sarasothi realised that she had no hope of survival in the presence of such a fox-like character and went in quietly, back to her chores. 'Aithalaré,' said Sheena, 'It is morning. Let the mango-leaf ritual begin. I shall get washed quickly and drink some hesaru ganji. Then you can ask me to do what you want.'

'All right Sheena,' said Aithala smiling. 'Don't leave me during the days of the wedding. Be it hesaru ganji or mosaru avalakki – whatever there is!' He liked the way Sheena had stopped Sarasothi from saying something and lifted the blame off him. So he felt that Sheena was the right man to manage the wedding.

When Sheena heard mosaru avalakki mentioned, he was all in favour of it. ' Do you think I had a meal last night? After walking all day in the sun, I drank enough water to fill my stomach. Let me appease my hunger with some mosaru avalakki and some jaggery and hesaru at midday. That will be enough. Hesaru water is like nectar on a hot day.' So saying, Sheena stepped out for his morning ablutions. Aithala went to wash his face.

Preparations went on for three days and everything was ready on the fourth. The ceremony was in the evening. As it was time for Sandhyavandané, the bridegroom stood wearing ornaments from anklets to ear-rings, turbaned and holding a

palm fan. Parothi watched him, unblinking, through a chink in the window. There was no way of fathoming what lay behind that look.

She was reminded of the early rites of her own wedding. Wearing the same clothes, a young man came to their house fifteen to twenty years ago on a palanquin in the pouring rain, to marry her. She remembered how they had no place to stand, and how she stole a look at her husband even in those difficult conditions. Her arrival at her husband's home and her constant longing to become a mother undulated before her eyes like waves. Eventually there arose in her mind grief over her infertility. What consolation now? Is the arrival of another wife to her man a source of happiness? Wouldn't there be some misunderstanding or the other? What guarantee was there that the other woman would respect her seniority? No matter how tolerant she was, wouldn't her husband's love drift away from her towards the other woman?

What was the justification for all that? The birth of a son who would offer oblations to their souls? It was understandable in Aithala's case. But how could she be related to a child born of another wife? The chain of thought turned into a flood and moistened her eyes, dimming her vision. She didn't have courage enough to look at her husband the bridegroom. A lot of relatives had already come to the house, making much noise. Who should look after them? What should she do? She had to think of all that.

Where was Sarasothi? Wouldn't she be longing to witness her brother's second conquest? But there was something more important than that. Happala should come off the roasting pan without getting burnt. Care should be taken that happalas made to last for a few days more would not get over in one day because of cooks who would be taken in by Sheena Mayya's grand words.

As Parothi's grief subsided, she felt that if she stayed in the background despite belonging to the household, a rumour would spread that the wedding had been conducted against her wishes. She didn't want that to happen, so she controlled

her surging grief and went to the pandal where cooking was going on. She joined Sarasothi who was helping fry happala and coughing from the smoke. But she had to get up soon with eyes streaming from the smoke. From there, she walked around in the pandal a few times, wearing a happy expression. She talked to her neighbours. 'Yes, Parothi. If your husband is all dressed up, he doesn't look older than twenty,' said a woman in admiration and Parothi smiled as well.

After the rituals were over, lunch was served. The pandal was full, with two hundred people taking up all the space. Guests were still streaming in. Aithala called Sheena Mayya to make sure there was enough food for everyone. Sheena was never short of honeyed words. He moved around and made arrangements instantly. When meals were half way through, there were about two hundred still waiting. Sheena went to those who were serving and admonished them. 'Shouldn't you have some sort of estimate? If you had served hot food fast, it would have been enough for two hundred more.' When he saw the kitchen he felt helpless. Sarasothi herself added water, tamarind, salt and chilli to saaru to make up the quantity. Rice was cooked quickly, and smoke spread over the whole village. However, after people at the first sitting had their fill, the second sitting was served a little later, Sheena ordered everyone else to sit down to eat since there would be no third sitting. So everyone sat, and Sheena too joined them. This time, rice and saaru were served hot and the servers moved on quickly. By the time people called for saaru, curry came along and likewise palidya. As that was being eaten, kadalé bélé payasa made with jaggery came along.

In fact, the food was extended to cover the second lot as well. 'What did I say? If you had done the same thing earlier, these people need not have waited so long. Remember this on the occasion of aarathi-akshathé,' said Sheena. No one spoke. But Sarasothi did speak, very softly. 'But then, Sheena Mayya, if we are so sparing with food, why call people at all?' Sheena laughed and said, 'That's different, Sarasothamma. If one has to have a full meal and belch, one should go to Udupi for a Madhvanavami meal or Rajangana meal.'

Sheena was in a hurry to start the procession. But how could they start? There were at least a hundred people still in the pandal. They had to be taken six miles. They presumed they would cross the estuary along the seashore, reach Thonsé and proceed. Sheena wasn't thinking of that. The family, people in the procession and himself, the leader, at least, should reach Thonsé over the river with the band and the wedding paraphernalia. If possible, he wanted the wedding party to pass in front of the warehouses along the harbour. But he had arranged for four boats. Even if people were packed in like measures of rice, it was possible to put sixty in three boats. One boat for the musicians, wedding material and fireworks people. But what should be done with two hundred who stood in the pandal hoping to be transported to the wedding?

Sheena came out of the pandal and looked west. 'Aithalaré, people who are walking should start right now. It will be dark soon. It takes a long time to cross the river at the estuary. Though I tried my best, I couldn't get more than four boats. The Hangarakatté bosses have taken all the boats to Konkarné for bringing rice. They let down our Aithala's wedding,' he said, going in.

'I will tell you what to do. The headmen and the family will go in boats, the rest can go along the beach.' Some went back home half-heartedly, not feeling up to walking all that way. Sheena whispered in some ears that they could take the boat. Some decided to go if there was place in the boats or else go back home.

There was little time left before sunset. The wedding party started off with music and fireworks. Everyone swarmed towards the river bank, causing quite a commotion. Some thought that their rights would be secure if they rushed and found places in the boats. The result was the bridegroom himself didn't have a place. Sheena Mayya was bewildered. He couldn't check those who were already in the boats – they were all close to the family. He started thinking about what he should do. Finding no way out, Aithala had to announce that the boats could go ahead and that he and others would walk to estuary along the fields and reach the beach. The

faces of people in the boats fell. They all got off. Sheena's voice regained its strength. 'One boat for material, wedding party, musicians, and money box. Heads of family in another. One boat for women. Others will make adjustments and sit in the remaining boat.'

Everyone found a place somehow. Some feared that it might become a water wedding. Sheena heard someone saying that. 'Our people can speak only of inauspicious things. They cannot say anything good,' he growled. Nevertheless, a few were scared and got off the boats voluntarily. They said they preferred to walk. The sun set on one side and the wedding party started from the other. The musicians started playing. Boats started moving. The fireworks man started his business. People stood here and there to watch the procession. In the dim light, it was no wonder that the bridegroom appeared very young.

It didn't take long for the boats to arrive at the Hangarakatté harbour. As it approached, Sheena Mayya's voice became ever so strong. 'Aithalaré, it doesn't matter if an extra measure of oil is spent. Let us light the torches. Let the well-off people of the port watch the procession,' he said, intending to show off. In keeping with the command, explosive fireworks were set alight. A couple of rockets were also fired. 'Should your voices dry up right in front of the harbour?' shouted Sheena Mayya and stirred up the musicians who had just begun to take a respite. Despite his efforts, neither the path of the boats nor the noise were near enough to be registered in the harbour. However, Sheena Mayya was happy that his proprietorship had been proved to the world.

As soon as they neared Thonsé, the order was given to burn four torches in each boat. As they blazed, they were reflected in the water and looked really beautiful. Moreover, it was summer, when the water would be very salty, and when it trembled, sparks of phosphorus shone. The wake of the boats shone like a silver sheet. The men in the wedding party chewed betel leaves and areca. Women sang traditional wedding songs. Those who looked after the wedding material had nothing to do. Their eyes were focussed on their boats

which moved on in the light of torches. 'What a good time it is for fishing, but for these brahmins! Look out there! Rows and rows of Baigé fish!' They were full of thoughts of fishing.

By the time the excitement of the wedding party was at its height, the boats came to the banks of Thonsé. 'Aithalaré, such a procession could go on for a longer distance by boat,' said Sheena. Everyone got off the boats in a hurry. Those who had come earlier were sitting in a row on the edge of a dry, ploughed field feeling that it wouldn't be proper to reach the wedding pandal beforehand. They all gathered together. Four flares became a hundred. The wedding procession assumed the form of an invasion. The procession started, with portable festoons, umbrella and flags right in front. The bridegroom was lifted into a palanquin. Sheena Mayya stood by the bank. Ahead of him went the money box. There was a finger-thick silver cord around Sheena Mayya's waist. A borrowed gold chain glittered there as well.

As he progressed amidst all this grandeur, Aithala was happy because the fortune of having a kingly wedding procession had been denied him once because of the wretched rain.

The appropriate time arrived at nightfall. When the procession reached Padumunnooru and stopped at the field before the bridal pandal, horns, trumpets and bugles blared continuously as if there was to be a war between both groups. Adding to all that were instruments not always in harmony, women's songs and the thundering fireworks! When the bride's people came to welcome the groom and take him inside, Rama Aithala had acquired utmost youth. By the time he reached the pandal, there was a silver-knobbed stick as well in Sheena Mayya's hand.

Looking at the pandal, no one felt that it was the second marriage. Cloth-covered pandal, mantapa sparkling with shiny filigree, the assembly of priests sitting around, and the assembly of families and of women! The assembly of Shudras gazing wide-eyed at the bamboo enclosure and the coconut fronds of the pandal!

The bridegroom was very content that day. So was the headman Sheena Mayya. Aithala's mother-in-law who could

have had cause for discontent was satisfied as well. This alliance came about only after it was known that Aithala was a man of prosperity. The bridegroom would be advanced in years. Moreover, the first wife was there as well. It was natural that such things would bother the bride's mother. But the way Aithala sat in all his finery, the way he stood like an extremely youthful man, and more than anything else, the way Parothi looked after the wedding party, made it appear that their house would be fine for their Sathyabhamé. All the doubts of the bride's mother vanished at the sight of Parothi herself bringing in gold ornaments and decking up the bride.

However, just one thing worried Sarasothi : Parothi's gold had not arrived that day. It wasn't merely that. Gold jewellery could not be borrowed from Holla's house for some reason or the other. In this one matter, Parothi was dissatisfied. Sarasothi herself had to console her saying she wasn't a child any more. She didn't need any more show.

Though Aithala was generally tight-fisted, he loosened his grip quite a bit for the wedding. Moreover, when Sheena was around for pomp and splendour, any fist would get loosened. The house was filled with near and dear ones who had gathered there because he was their priest. They presented him with a whole lot of dhotis with silk border, sarees and blouse pieces for the bride. The groom's people held back nothing as far as cash gifts were concerned.

For four days, Sheena Mayya carried on the expedition from the groom's house to Padumunnooru, preferring not to stay in the quarters arranged by the bride's people in order to save money. Two days after the wedding, there were an additional two boats, and all important persons were transported over the river. It was daytime and the bride's party had no business there. All boats touched the banks of the Hangarakatté harbour and reached Thonsé. On the third day, the day of milk and ghee, those who saw the procession say it was twice as grand as the wedding procession. Sheena Mayya discovered the secret of making the procession glitter in the dark. That morning, it was made sure that no dry palm

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In the six months after the wedding Sathyabhamé stayed at her husband's for almost three months. Sarasothi, watching her behaviour, gradually approved of her. Though the girl had grown up among Shivalli people, it became certain that she was just as ordinary as the Kota folk.

Though Parothi did all the housework in the beginning, Sathyabhamé started helping her though she wasn't asked. Even though she was told that there was no need to, she insisted on working. She took over minor jobs like washing up and sweeping the floor. At times, she would take cattle out for grazing. The only thing she didn't do for a long time was cooking. It was not as if she didn't know how. She had heard the discussion that took place regarding cooking at Shivalli, when the wedding party returned home after four days of the wedding. She thought that even in her husband's opinion, Shivalli cooking was inclined to be too sweet. That was why she was scared to cook. So, though she helped in scraping and cleaning, she never really cooked. Parothi didn't ask her to, either.

One day, Sheena Mayya arrived at their house. 'Aithalaré, how is Sathya's cooking? Is it still Padumunnooru or has it travelled till Kodi?' he asked. Aithala hadn't tasted his wife's cooking though she had been there for six months. He called her. 'Sathya, cook a lovely meal, a Nalapaaka, and serve us. Our wedding manager is also here. I am fed up eating the curry and palidya Parothi makes everyday.' Her heart sank. 'No, I won't,' she said coquettishly from where she stood, and went away.

At lunch time, Aithala and his friend, Sheena Mayya, sat side by side. Sheenappa distrusted everything. He had gone to the backyard and had tucked some green chillies at his waist before he came in for lunch. They were not hidden from Sathyabhamé's eyes and she was amazed. She was so scared that she didn't even go near the jaggery pot. 'Attigé,' she said to Sarasothi, 'What distrust! He has tucked green chillies at his waist.' Sarasothi decided to teach him a lesson and chopped a few more green chillies into what had been prepared. Sheena Mayya started eating. Though it was too hot, he didn't show it. Aithala was trying to cope with it. 'Sheena, what is it like today?' he asked, laughing, 'Doesn't it seem as if our Sathya is from Kodi itself?'

Vanity wouldn't let Sheena agree. 'Are you saying it is hot? I think there is just a little too much jaggery. It may be too hot for you but it is not hot enough for me.' He took out the green chillies from his waist, crushed them into his rice and ate. He was victorious before Aithala. But he became a barefaced liar as far as the women were concerned.

Aithala praised his wife for the cooking and said that it was quite excellent though it was a little too hot. Sathyabhamé also started getting turns to cook because of the appreciation.

After the wedding, a year passed somehow. Sathyabhamé, when she came from her parents' house, head bent, didn't reach Parothi's shoulder, it was said. But within six months, she had bloomed and her forehead even hit the door beams. The wedding was over and consummated in three months. Before the year was out, the Seemantha, celebrating her pregnancy, was also held. Sathyabhamé had gone to Padumunnooru to become a mother. Parothi was anxious all the time. Would it be a boy or a girl? Would the childbirth be easy or difficult? That was all she talked about. Sarasothi and Parothi were very excited about a new light being born into the house. Sarasothi would wish for a boy. If God granted a male child after all those years, the family would be redeemed. Parothi pledged fruits and coconuts to Arama God if it was a boy. Since Parothi trusted the strength in her legs, she pledged the same to Aneguddé Ganapathi. She also added kadalé panchakajjaya to the offerings she would make.

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Rama Aithala would send messages once in two days to Padumunnooru to enquire about the well-being of Sathyabhamé who had reached the full term of her pregnancy. Some stars were not all that well-suited to the birth of a child. It was almost the end of summer. He was afraid that the baby would have to face the summer heat or the cold winds of early monsoon. He wouldn't have hesitated to camp in his father-in-law's house at that time. But he had his priestly duties to perform and agricultural problems as well. He had no free time.

Whether he wandered along the edge of his fields or officiated in a Gana Homa with his disciples, all his thoughts were about the birth of his son.' Which star is this? Not good for the mother. Which is this? Not suitable for the father. There is prosperity under this star! But one cannot really call it a good star.' He checked every star in relation to the moment of the child's birth.

His calculations and expectations didn't appear to be rewarding. Eventually, he said with disappointment, 'Parothi, if I depend upon your useless calculations and wait, nothing will happen. If you ask me, she is just eight months gone.' 'Doesn't Anna know that much arithmetic? When was the consummation ritual? From then, it has been nine months. She will deliver within ten days at the most, give or take a few days. What is there to lose?' Sarasothi said. After the discussion, the three of them walked towards the field and came to the river bank on a summer evening. The manure hadn't yet been transferred to the fields. The mud had to be transported to the field as soon as it had dried in the sun. They couldn't afford to pay for such piece work, and so, were going to do it themselves.

After bringing the doni, the country-boat, midstream and tying it to a bamboo pole planted in the water, they started scooping up mud. They each held a container. Holding it, they had to dive into the water, scoop up the mud, and surface. It had to be emptied into the boat and they had to dive back again. It was neither an easy job nor a pleasant one. Body and face would be covered in mud; on diving, it would be washed

off. At some places, where the river wasn't so deep, they didn't need to hold their breath for long while they scooped up mud. Where it was deep, it was difficult to dive, scoop up mud, fill it in the container and bring it up. One would have to learn holding one's breath for a long time. Besides, it wasn't possible to open one's eyes in salt water.

They worked all afternoon and filled half the boat with slush. But their work came to a halt. Someone was calling 'Aithalaré, Aithalaré,' from the edge of a faraway field. They had tied the boat in fairly deep water, so it was not possible to stand up and find out who was calling. One had to hold on to the side of the boat and peer around. Though the neck was stretched as far as possible, the chungi thorn bushes came in between. Unable to see who was calling, Aithala shouted, 'Who is calling? Come over here. We are scooping up mud.'

His voice reached far. The man who had come looking for him heard it and came over in the direction of the boat. Aithala, ornamentally dressed in just a loincloth and covered in mud from head to toe, was installed in the back of the boat. Parothi and Sarasothi carried on working. A young man around twenty appeared. 'O Rama Aithalaré,' he called right in front of the man himself. Aithala answered. Unable to recognise him, the man looked around here and there. But there was nothing to stop Aithala from recognising him. 'Oh, our brother-in-law is here! Perhaps he couldn't recognise us! Just wait!' said Aithala, jumping into the water, scrubbing himself clean and getting into the boat. 'Our Sathya.... How is she doing?' he questioned from where he stood.

The young man who had arrived, stood there, caught by Aithala's appearance and current occupation, instead of considering the question he had asked. He too had grown up among farmers, but not like this. They had given their fields on lease and grown up in comfort with what they received from it. So he was slightly puzzled about his brother-in-law. He had heard that Aithala was a prosperous man. Getting immersed in the mud didn't appear proper to him. Moreover, he thought it was strange to see even the women of the household diving into the water just like the man. He started

wondering if his little sister too would have to enter this vocation.

While these thoughts were going around in his head, Aithala and the women clambered onto the boat and reached the bank. Aithala looked at his brother-in-law. 'Bhava, let's go home. Why should we stand here? How is Sathya?' he asked. Then came the reply : 'Sathya has delivered. Mother and child are both well.' 'A boy or a girl?' asked Sarasothi. 'A boy,' was the answer. Aithala started calculating what star the child had been born under. `We shall see to all that at home,' said Sarasothi. 'Should we not look after our guest? Let the boat stay here; the mud can be emptied in the night. There's moonlight as well.'

Aithala walked home, with his brother-in-law walking in front. The women followed him. By the time they reached home, it wasn't as if Aithala was unashamed of his appearance before his Bhava, his brother-in-law. 'Bhava, you take down the coloured mat stuck in the ceiling beam and sit down. I shall quickly take a dip in the tank and get back. I shouldn't come into the house looking like this,' he said. And so, Bhava sat in the house, leaning against a pillar. Wherever he looked he could neither see colour nor a coloured mat. Consequently, he established himself on the bare floor.

Sarasothi took a dip sooner than anyone else and ran back. 'Couldn't you find the mat at all?' she said. She brought a mat from the room, asked him to sit on it, rushed into the kitchen and lit the stove. Meanwhile, Aithala arrived. After the bath he wore a dry dhoti and took out the snuff box. He took a pinch and offered it to his brother-in-law, unsure whether he would take it. What then was his intention in placing the box before him? This was the reason: it wasn't the box he used everyday, which was just a hollow bilvapathra fruit, plugged with tobacco. What had been offered was the one he carried when he went somewhere of his own accord (and not for his duties). It was made of porcelain, with a silver rim. There was a crown on the lid as well. Since it was fairly big, it looked like a radiant adornment for the mat.

'Was the delivery difficult? Has the afterbirth fallen? How is the baby?' As the enquiries went on, Parothi brought water for washing feet, diluted buttermilk in a cup, and fried happala and sandigé left over from the Seemantha celebration. Sarasothi came right behind her. 'Is the child like the father or mother?' she asked. 'How can you tell now? It is just a tiny, red mite,' said Aithala.

'Never a mite. Looking at her, one could say a big baby would be born. That too, a first-born. Never tiny,' said Sarasothi.

'The child is fair and big. His head is full of hair. I don't know whom he resembles. Probably himself !' said Bhava.

As happala and sandigé were eaten, teasing and joking went on. For a little while, Parothi felt uneasy. She went into the kitchen. Sitting in the dark, she wept over the fact that God had not granted her a child. A thought must have struck her. She felt consoled and came out reminding herself to offer coconut and fruits to God Arama. Another thought came to her. She hadn't enquired whether Sathyabhamé had had an easy time at childbirth or not. So, she went up to the young man and asked if it had been difficult. Probably, said the clever man. How could he give an answer to questions which arose from the realm of women? He had just guessed.

As evening fell, he explained quietly. 'Appayya asked me to go back at night. There is no one at home. I should be leaving.' Would Aithala let him go? 'What is Bhava saying? You should have a meal with payasa for having brought good news. Is there any meaning in leaving just like that? I will also go with you tomorrow morning. What's the hurry now?'

'No. I must go,' he answered.

'There is nothing a man can do in matters regarding childbirth,' said Aithala.

Bhavaraya did not have the courage to say anything further. He had to stay the night. Parothi ran to Sheena Mayya and borrowed a quarter seer of toor dal. Saaru and pathrodé made from kesuvé leaves were prepared for dinner.

Happala and sandigé were not forgotten either. Avalakki payasa was made because it could be prepared quickly and easily. What else could the shy Bhavaraya say when Aithala himself recommended it for its cardamom content? 'Very good,' he said. Parothi said it was good for one's health. By the time avalakki payasa and pathrodé were consumed and Bhava stood up, he was inert like the mud-filled boat he had seen in the evening. After dinner, he positioned himself on the mat. There were roasted cashewnuts in front of him along with a fine lump of jaggery in a plate. The moment the guest wanted nothing better than a pillow, Sheena Mayya arrived since he had learnt that toor dal had been borrowed. 'Ho, someone from Padumunnooru has arrived. That's good.' he exclaimed.

Aithala said, 'Sheena, our Sathya has delivered a male child. I was not sure if it would be a boy or a girl. By God Narasimha's grace, it was a boy after all.'

'You yourself said that her horoscope foretold the birth of three sons. If it is so in the horoscope, how can she have a girl instead of a boy?' A plate of areca and betel leaves arrived before him. His mind flowed towards the offerings. It was decided that roasted cashewnuts would be demolished first and then it would be betel leaves. 'Won't you take some cashewnuts?' he kept asking others and emptied the container which had a hundred nuts, all by himself. 'Aithalaré, it is said that cashewnuts add heat to the body. But the wretched thing is never distasteful,' he said. Then there was a generous helping of tamboola. 'Oh, won't you taken even betel leaves and arecanuts?' he asked, polishing off everything himself and talking all the while. As he kept on chewing tobacco, Sheena got inspired. 'Anyway, our Aithala has proved himself to be a man!' The young man, half asleep and eating jaggery, laughed. Aithala felt awkward and said nothing. 'What I said was,' continued Sheena, 'nothing sparkles if children do not wander around in the house. Moreover, people say that a male child is definitely needed for redemption of souls.'

'Bhava appears sleepy. There's a lovely breeze in the hall. By the time your head touches the pillow made from fresh palmyra leaves, you will be asleep,' said Aithala , giving

his brother-in-law a home-made mat and pillow. He spread a coverlet over them. Bhavaraya was barely aware of lying down. He fell asleep straightaway.

Aithala and Sheena sat facing each other and started chatting. Between them, the honné oil lamp burnt dimly. `No oil even for the lamp?' asked Aithala.

'There is milk-like moonlight outside. Put out this light. What purpose does it serve?' said Sheena. After it was put out, he started singing praises of his family.

Who knows how long the great conference went on. When Sheenappa announced that it was late and he was sleepy, Sarasothi and Parothi stepped into the verandah after coming back from the river bank, having bathed for the fourth or fifth time in the tank in front of the house.'Who's that?' asked Sheenappa. 'Sarasothi? Did you go to water the seed beds in this darkness?'

'No, Seenappa. When the visitor came, we had come off in a hurry without taking out the mud from the boat. Mogera Gowda had said that the boat must go to Kalyanapura tomorrow morning. He didn't want his work to be disturbed. So, we put all the mud in a field, washed the boat and tied it up near his house. In dealing with mud, is there any way out other than bathing after touching it?'

Sheenappa talked for a while about the ups and downs of his household. He felt like sniffing snuff at the time of leaving. 'Aithalaré, I hope you haven't slept off. Please give me a pinch of snuff.' Aithala brought the silver container to the verandah. Sheenappa sniffed some, kept a pinch between his fingers and said, 'So hot! Not even sellers in the market can prepare the powder as well as Aithala can make it.'

'They do not make the powder. But they add as much butter for moisture as lime and ruin it. If their snuff is taken for a week, the eyes will burn away,' he bragged and went back to the hall.

Sheenappa sniffed the pinch he held and remembered that Aithala had brought it in a silver snuff container. 'When did this brahmin start sporting a silver container instead of a

bilvapathré shell?' he started wondering. He dreamt about it at home that night. He also dreamt that a silver container of his own had been stolen.

The night passed and morning dawned after Bhavaraya's arrival. The guest had to be served breakfast. In those days there was no coffee. Parothi spiced up a little avalakki and served it. Green gram had been boiled into a gruel, and jaggery added, for it cooled the system. Aithala bathed early in the morning, left puja in the hands of Sheenappa's son and sat for breakfast with his brother-in-law. 'Bhava, the stomach is full. We may start now. I shall come too. It has been a month since I saw Sathya. It is our tradition to do all farming jobs ourselves. We have a lot of labourers, but if they come to work, we have to keep watch. Otherwise, things will go wrong. Or else, they spend time talking and nothing gets done. That's why I believe it is best that we take up all jobs, however difficult they may be.' He justified the previous evening's boat episode in this manner.

'How much do you get from agriculture?' he asked his brother-in-law.

'My Appayya cannot move around. He suffers from gout. So we have given all that we own on lease, hoping to get what we may.'

'But then, how do you spend time sitting around doing nothing? Although your father is afflicted, you are young. Shouldn't you be doing something to improve your property?'

'I like helping with village accounts'

'Does your family have the right to this profession, shanubhogiké?'

'We don't, but there is a possibility of getting it from a relative of ours. If we pay five hundred rupees, it is all ours.'

'If you can get it, it will be plenty. You'll get respect as well as profit. Do it, and something else as well, and get some of the government land to the west of your house added to your property. Although it may not fetch a good price today, it may, fifty years later.'

Aithala kept giving the young man such brilliant advice all the way to Padumunnooru. As he stepped into his father-in-law's house, he could hear the racket his lion of a son was making. 'Why is the child screaming so loud? Is he not well?' enquired Aithala. How would his brother-in-law know? He too had just come in.

As his father-in-law Madappayya welcomed Aithala with great joy, he spoke of his grandson. The washerwoman was bringing the child fresh from his bath. He had been bathed in hot, medicinal water with no concessions offered whatsoever for being a newborn. The pink, young body had turned red due to the hot water. The child was bawling without stopping for breath. Aithala felt consoled, realising that it was just the bath that had caused the crying.

'Aithalaré, is the baby like our Sathya or you?' asked the father-in-law.

'It seems to take after Sathya.'

'His eyes are just like yours,' said his mother-in-law.

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Aithala smiled, looking at the child. He named him Lakshminarayana according to the good fortune indicated by the stars. Though the name became 'Lachcha' from the moment it was given, they had it written down as Lakshminarayana in the horoscope.

Aithala wanted to take Sathyabhamé home in a month. His heart surged with love for his son like the sea during the rains. He was about to send word for them, but Sarasothi intervened. 'The whole town takes one path and the naughty boy takes another! It is the custom for a woman who has just had a baby to stay at her mother's place for three months. Moreover, how can we ask her to come back a month after her first child? What a time to bring her back! The rainy season is at its peak.'

'When the month is over, can we bring her back in Asadi?'

'Asadi and Soné – both months should pass. Once the roaring rain has abated and the harvest season is over, it will be the right time to bring her back. If you ask me, I would say she can come back at the beginning of Navarthri.' There was no way but to accept her decision.

God only knew how Aithala spent those three rainy months thinking about Sathyabhamé. When there was still a fortnight to go for Navarathri he was planning where to tie the cradle and how to make a good one with wood from the jackfruit tree. A baby-room was made ready by putting up an enclosure between two pillars in the hall. A crude carpenter was called to chisel and carve for eight days and a beautiful cradle was made. Sarasothi praised it, too, saying that the thick ropes that pulled the Koteshwara chariot would be needed to bear the weight of the cradle. When work was coming to an end, Aithala saw how plain it was. `What can I say about your imagination, Achari? You have just stuck boards together instead of carving the sun and the moon on them.' So, the bolts and pegs were removed and the carpenter took two days to finish the carving. Hanumachari, the carpenter who came home, was an old man. Though he was no good at his job, his tongue was sharper than a chisel. He spent eight days on the pretext of making the cradle. After that, he quietly called Aithala aside. 'Aithalaré, you don't have a big box in your house to keep rice. The hall doesn't good without it. Look, there is a jackfruit tree at the back. It has grown all twisted and is no good for making boards. If it is cut, a good box can be made.' Aithala agreed.

At dinner time, Sarasothi scolded her brother. ' Don't listen to Hanuma's words and axe the tree. If nothing else, we get at least fifty raw jackfruits a year. We get good fruit though it is a little soft. What is it to him? The box is just a pretext. He is just thinking of ways to get paid for two months.'

Aithala had to act according to her decision. 'But I have asked him to come tomorrow to make an estimate,' he said.

'No need at all. No estimate or any such thing is needed. There is no need to say yes after being taken in by his tongue. You go and tell Sathya's people on what day she should be sent. If Hanumachari comes, I shall send him back.'

Sarasothi's advice was heeded. Aithala left very early in the morning for Padumunnooru to escape from Hanumachari. When he arrived, Sarasothi spoke quietly. 'Achari, that's a fine idea of yours! We get a few raw jackfruits for cooking and around fifty ripe fruits. Did you come here to tell us to write it all off? It is only after a portal is built for the house that we can think of making a big rice box. When we don't have one, why should we think of the other?' He was successfully chased away.

* * *

Sathya and Lakshminarayana came home at the time of Navarathri. Everyone at home called him Lachcha. Even a year after his home-coming, one couldn't decide whether he looked like his father or his mother. Everyone had his own opinion. Some even took it as far back as the grandfather, saying that he was the spitting image of Kodanda Aithala.

Sathyabhamé came home at the right time. Otherwise, would the new cow that Sarasothi had hankered after arrive home within a month of Sathyabhamé's coming? Aithala was happy that by God's grace, the new mother would not be short of milk.

As days went by, Lachcha received endless care. Parothi, Sarasothi, father and mother — no one wanted to put him down on the floor. Aithala's love and affection, so far hidden, now became obvious. No wind should blow on Lachcha, no sun, no cold, no heat should affect him – he kept quoting from his knowledge of medicine.

Aithala started doing something new that he liked. When he had no priestly duties, he would sit in the drawing room with his wife. He would sit leaning against a pillar and Sathya

would sit nearby leaning against a wall. Lachcha would be lying on a mat between them. It wouldn't be wrong to say that Sathya had become a queen after his birth. Lachcha wore a gold waist-string. 'Everyone will like it,' Aithala would say proudly. Sheena, who frequented the house, wasn't unaware of it. When both of them – husband and wife – were together, he would praise them no end and get happala and sandigé. But he wasn't all that approving behind their back. 'Even big people of this town cannot afford silver waist-strings for their children. This slave of custom, this brahmin — does he need a gold waist-string because he has had a boy ?'

If Aithala asked him how he liked his son's waist-string he would answer that it was gold, after all. The very next moment, he would say, 'It is not right to have a gold waist-string on the child. You will have to keep an eye on it. It is not good to have a child wearing gold.'

'What do you mean? Will Kandaris from Kabul come here to snatch it?' Aithala would answer lightheartedly.

~ 8 ~

Sheena Mayya's visits to Aithala's house were becoming very frequent of late. Enquiry about Lachcha's welfare as soon as he arrived; then, praise of Sathya; next, elaboration of his numerous problems – these were the proceedings whenever he visited. Until now, Sheena Mayya's sorrows had never come out one by one. It was customary for them to emerge in hordes. 'A measure of rice needed right now,' 'Can't manage without two seers of huruli this evening,' on one day, and 'fifty palm fronds' the day after. In this manner, he would build up numerous pretexts for frequenting the house. The friendship and intimacy acquired during Aithala's wedding continued to grow stronger so that Sheena Mayya's wants and their fulfilment became quite a routine. If Aithala was seen bringing a few brinjals home, Sheena would appear in the

evening. ' I am sick of eating huruli saaru, halasina bélé and cucumber curry. Please give me a brinjal, Sathyamma,' he would say. Neither would his lengthy recitals end until he had got it.

But Sheenappa should be commended on one particular count. Such borrowing always took place when Sarasothi and Parothi were out in the field or the garden. If Sathyamma was praised without reservation, what he asked for would materialise even if it wasn't there.

Regardless of all the coming and going, Sheenappa hadn't acquired a proper perception of Aithala. He thought that Aithala dealt only in small change and owned none of the higher denominations. He thought that Aithala earned just enough to go on living, as the saying goes, not less than three and not more than four. But he was surprised that so much had been spent on the wedding without borrowing at all. He wondered if the brahmin had buried a hundred rupees somewhere in a pot. Even then, he felt that not a pi would have remained after the wedding. Remembering that Aithala had offered snuff from a silver box a year after the wedding on the day his brother-in-law had arrived, Sheena Mayya felt that Aithala was not too badly off. His suspicion became stronger when he saw the gold waist-string on Lachchanna. He asked a few days later if it was a gift from the child's grandfather. When he made sure that it was indeed from the father, his respect towards him increased. 'This fellow is solid. Definitely not hollow,' he thought. One day he proceeded to use his intelligence to do some calculations on the matter. 'How long has it been since Rama Aithala started doing his priestly duties independently after the death of his father, Kodanda Aithala? How many houses did he go to? How many weddings, death anniversaries and thread ceremonies took place in a year? How much cash could he have earned?' Taking everything into account, he decided that the brahmin had saved over a thousand rupees. He also decided that borrowing two hundred rupees from Aithala would not make a dent. From that day, he completely stopped going over to borrow salt, tamarind and pepper.

He got into the habit of visiting Aithala every afternoon after lunch. He would make sure that it would be the time when Aithala and Sathya would sit chatting. Could he keep quiet then? 'Aithalaré, your wife's cooking is just like the Great Cook, Nalaraya's. I have never eaten anything like the bitter-gourd curry she made the day before yesterday. Perhaps it is made that way only in the grand chowki lunch in Udupi. Even if she just spices up water, it will turn into delicious saaru,' he eulogised.

Once in a while, Aithala would open up his heart in joy. 'Sheena, Parothi is not lagging behind in work. Nor is Sarasothi. They do cook. Cooking and eating – that's enough for my Sarasothi. There is no orderliness in her, though. Sathya is not like that at all; nor is she likely to prepare too much food. You don't feel like leaving behind even a bit of what she has cooked. It is only after she came here that I started eating well at home. It's the wretched palate of a priest, you see! Having eaten well in numerous places, I don't relish food that is not really well-made. Even then, I have not been able to resist Sathya's cooking until now,' he too would praise her.

'That's certain. I myself found out the other day –when was it – the day you made kadalé bélé payasa? I won't forget the taste even when I die,' said Sheenappa, supporting Aithala's words.

In this manner, he learnt very well the effect his praise for Sathya would have on Aithala. He pretended to love Lachcha more than his own children. In between, he would whisper to her husband, loud enough for her to hear if she was at a distance, 'Aithalaré, they are from Padumunnooru. Your father-in-law, your brother-in-law or anyone else has never carried manure to the field nor held a hoe in their hands. I am talking of Sathya – she has no experience of toiling in a field like these people from Koti and Kanyana. Don't make her carry manure.'

Aithala replied in a serious tone. 'Do you think I am a stone idol of Bobbaraya, a trivial god? Are you saying that I know how to bring home a wife from a prosperous family but do not know how to take care of her?'

Ever since Sathyabhama's arrival, a struggle had been going on in Aithala's mind. Should he or should he not send her along with Sarasọthi and Parothi to hold the water basket, carry manure and mud, and plant seedlings? He felt some hesitation about letting the younger wife sit around in the hall while the older one wilted in the sun. Sathyabhama, unable to watch the hard work done by Parothi while she stayed indoors, had tried to venture out as well. Aithala could not say no. So he would cunningly say that whoever wanted to draw water could go, but someone had to look after Lachcha. Hearing this, Parothi would send back Sathyabhama to look after Lachcha, saying that there would always be some work or the other, later, which she could do.

Aithala would sit conversing with Sathya. As he watched her, the feeling that he too was very young started growing in him. He would stay at home on some pretext, instead of drawing water, in order to flirt around with Sathya. It was not as if the partiality was not obvious to Sarasothi. When sarees were bought, the senior wife would get something inexpensive but the younger would receive an expensive one. Every time this happened, Sarasothi scolded her brother for the discrimination. In addition, Aithala had to show off before Sathyabhama's people that he was also a moneyed man. As a consequence, differences between the old matrimonial relationship and the new one started growing.

However, the only one who approved of the changes was Sheenappa. He realised how he could profit from them. Just think about it. It hadn't been two years since the wedding. Sheena Mayya was putting pressure on Aithala to lend him two hundred rupees. Aithala was free with his advice, saying that to borrow was to be impaled on a spear, and that it was better not to ask. Sheena put forth a long list of demands. 'Maharayaré, if you don't trust me enough, get two reliable witnesses to sign and have a deed written.' Not finding a way out, Aithala did lend the money at the rate of three percent with interest.

In the six months after Sheena took the loan, one of the excuses he had used was exposed. In those days, there

was no one in Kodi who had a roof made of tiles. All had thatched houses. People believed that tiles couldn't withstand the gales from the sea. The thought of a tiled roof hadn't even occurred to Aithala who had put a gold band around his son's waist. In such circumstances, the desire grew strong in Sheenappa's heart to show off with a tiled roof on his house. After having seen Aithala's wedding procession, he had even longed to get married again. But his wife Vagdevi was not dumb like Parothi. She could tweak his ear. So, he gave a different shape altogether to his intense longing. A portal should be built in front of the house, facing north. Though the foundation and walls were of mud, the door and pillars should be carved by Hanumachari himself and the roof made of tiles. Tiles made by potters would not be used. Mangalore tiles, even if they be of the 'number three' kind, which came to Hangarakatté harbour on sailboats, should be bought. He felt that tiled roofs were not exclusive to the rich people of the harbour. If the palmyra which grew wild were split, there would be enough beams for the portal.

On the very day that he was assured of a loan from Aithala, Sheena Mayya started on the job of redoing his house. His wife, children and he carried mud and laid a foundation in front of their house. They mixed the mud and strengthened the ground. When time came for raising the wall, they called the only labourer they knew, and took the other jobs on their own shoulders. Building a portal was no joke. He needed a jackfruit wood frame, pillars and beams. He had never planted and nurtured jackfruit trees. Ever since he started dreaming of a portal, he began researching into where he could obtain jackfruit trees or big logs. Once, he took off to Barakooru. While talking to someone, he heard that prepared wood was available in a place some three miles away. He followed up on the information immediately and reached that village by evening. He made sure who had it and where. Not wanting to pay in cash, he agreed to transport ten palmyra trees all the way there. Within a week of the agreement, he brought down the trees, pleaded with the boatmen he knew, tied the logs to their boats, waited for the moon-tide and

transported them at night. The next day, he got the wood he needed. In like manner, the jackfruit logs were transported home as well.

Now remained the worry about who should do the woodwork. There were only two people who were well-known: Hanumachari and Nagappa Achari. Realising that Hanumachari's buffalo-milk vending chores would never be over, he frequented the young Nagappa Achari's house with greater determination than a moneylender. He made Nagappa Achari accept the condition that half his labour charges would be paid that year and the other half, God willing , in the month of Shravana, a year after. Pillar frame, windows and beams were put up for the portal. The very next day, after two hundred rupees was received from Aithala, a visit to Hangarakatté harbour was undertaken. He asked every store-owning rich man the cost of two thousand tiles. He talked to the boatmen who frequented the harbour. Deciding eventually that all the rich rascals talked to one another and fixed the rates, he bought tiles by paying half the cash then and there, and asking for a time limit of six months to settle the rest. He pressured the fishermen of the beach to transport them. Not a single worker in the village could sleep until the mortar work of the portal was over.

Nagappa Achari was fed up by the time the frame was carved. 'Sheenappayya, one can bear being possessed by a spirit. But to bear your pressure is quite impossible.' If he said that a mere frame was enough, would Sheenappayya keep quiet? He said that there was no way that an alligator's mouth, a lotus and a pair of parrots would not be carved in. If he was told that the labour charges would go up, he wasn't bothered. 'Don't scare me like that. I have brought wood with no knots. Splinters will fly as if butter is being carved.'

One night, father and children laid the roof tiles, took them off, laid them, took them off again and eventually finished the work. Sheenappa came out and went near the river bank to see what the portal looked like. 'Silly me! A tiled house and a thatched house look the same at night. I should see it in

the morning,' he decided. Could he even sleep that night? He went off to the river bank even before brushing his teeth and came back after sunrise, greatly satisfied that the top of the portal was no less impressive than that of a palace. 'After mortaring is over, I am sure one will say that Pampapathi Vasudeva's bungalow is nothing compared to this,' he decided.

After the final touches were given, Sheenappa's eldest son Narasimha, coming back from Kota market, brought some fresh information. 'Appayya, the tiles on our housetop can be seen from Thekkaté in the north, Hangarakatté in the south and Sastha in the east.' When Sheenappa Mayya heard it, he felt jubilant as if he had performed the Ashwamedha Yaga.

One day, Aithala had gone to a village to the east of the river to perform an annual death ceremony. Remembering Sathyabhamé, he started back home before evening fell. Just as he stepped into the river to cross it, he could see a new tiled roof by the edge of the sea. He wondered who along their shore had put up a tiled roof. After crossing the river, he walked homewards but was drawn towards what he had seen. He was eager to know whose bungalow it was, but he forgot about it when he saw a few cows near their seed beds. He went to chase them away and walked home.

A few days after that, Aithala remembered Sheenappa. 'Sathya, our Sheena Mayya hasn't appeared here from the moment he took the money,' he said, musing. At that very moment did Sheena arrive through the front door. 'Aithalaré, didn't you wonder whether I was dead or alive?' he asked.

'Sheenappayya, he said that only after showing me that you had come,' said Sathyabhamé shrewdly. Aithala laughed as well and welcomed Sheenappa. He felt extremely proud of his wife's worldly wisdom and came to the conclusion that even the key to the money box could be handed over to such a wife. But, of course, he didn't do any such thing.

Over here, conversation had to be carried on with Sheena. 'But then, Sheena, you used to come around here often. What else can I say if you didn't appear for over a week?' he answered Sheenappa.

Sheena started off with his long-winded narrative. 'Aithalaré, the problems in my house are not one or two. I thought I could pull down the cowshed and start off on a portal. Everyone who looks at my house makes fun of it. "Is this temple of a mean God going to stay like this?" they would say. There are four children at home. Shouldn't there be a decent place to take shelter at night during the rainy season?' he began the preface.

'That's right, Sheena. Your talking about cowsheds and halls reminds me. The other day as I was coming back from Kota market, I saw a tiled house by our very shore! Who has so much money, maraya? If the south wind blows hard from the estuary, nothing will be left for the rainy season.'

Sheena could not but give an answer. Moreover, he needed an opportunity to explain matters regarding the loan. But he couldn't speak out instantly. So he changed the trail of conversation. 'May a tiger catch all that. Tell me where Lachcha is. I don't feel good if I don't see him.' Without stopping, he said, 'Aithalaré, what do you say? We are thinking of sending our son, Narasimha, to Bangalore. Herlé says that he will give a gold coin every month. I have some loans as well. That can also be paid back. Moreover, with four children, what can one do, keeping them here ?'

'You are foolish, Sheena. Did God give us birth as brahmins to clean up food left uneaten by others who belong to who knows what castes? Does it matter to Herlé? It doesn't matter to him even if he makes money by selling cooked rice. It's enough for him if he can build another floor to his house.'

'Aithalaré, Herlé's hotel is well-known all over Bangalore. People who go to Tirupathi and people who have been in the hotel say that he is greatly respected in Bangalore. Moreover, only brahmins can eat there. You tell me, can we fill our stomachs if we sit at home? I have fields which give me only eight measures of grain. What can I earn from it? When I die and the property is shared, how much will the children get? Each will get a two-mudi field. If I die tomorrow, how will they live? Being in distress, whatever they do will become permissible. It is said that Vishwamitra ate dog meat during

famine. This happened even to a man like him because of the exigencies of the time he lived in. You speak of selling cooked rice. What is wrong with selling cooked rice and what is so great about selling rice as grains? Isn't boiled rice made from boiling paddy and sold?'

'Sheena, your tongue is like a barber's razor. I just said it for fun. You may send your son to Bangalore or Mysore. It is enough if, on the whole, the children live well. That was not what I was talking about. Who will look after the young children if they fall ill in a distant place? It they are in pain or difficulty, who will care for them? If they fall seriously ill, it will take four days to reach Shivamoggé. All these thoughts came to me and I said so.'

'It is all the result of our past deeds, you see. If they are fated to drink the water of that place, they will do so. If they are fated to drink the water from the tank at home, that's what they will do. But it is not so bad now. Our Vagdevi's brother's son is also there. I am sure the boy will be looked after if he is sick or something. You see, that's why I want to provide him with a sacred thread before he goes.'

'Oh, Upanayana for your Narasimha! Most certainly. It should have been done last year itself. You said it wasn't auspicious.'

'Not only that. Money power was also low. What can be done if rice fetched six pavali for a mudi? What is left after paying taxes to the government? Thanks to what you did, I ended up having a hall for people to sit in. If a Gana Homa and Upanayana can be performed there, maybe, thanks to your yoga, he will work and clear your debt later. It's late. I came to tell you about the Upanayana. It is next Monday. The day is not far off. I'll make sure lunch gets over quickly. All of you must come. I don't know how to say things to make you feel welcome. I know in my mind what feelings there are.'

'Aye, Sheena,you may forget to invite me, but I am the sort who will come just by hearing the music.'

'It is because I know that you show me such concession, that I just told you of the Upanayana instead of bringing

akshathé along. If all of you come and participate in the function, you will have blessed the child with brahminism.'

Sheenappa Mayya who had gone on from the preface to the conclusion, noticed only then that Sathyabhama had left the place. 'Oh, the Mistress of Padamunnoru is not here!' he exclaimed. Going to the kitchen, he poured forth his verbal coquetry and came out.

On his way from there, he met Sarasothi and Parothi at the bottom of the field. He spoke to them briefly, asking them to come on Monday for the small Upanayana ritual at home and started to walk away.

'Is it Upanayana or a house-warming?' asked Sarasothi.

'Nothing like that. It's all included. I just put some tiles over the temple of a little God, ' he said finishing his conversation and walking away homewards on the pretext of some urgent work.

Laughing, Sarasothi and Parothi walked home. They were unaware of the loan of two hundred rupees

The day for Upanayana arrived. 'Get up early and reach Sheena's house. Don't go in the middle of the afternoon like relatives,' Aithala ordered the folk at home. 'What's there for all of us to do?' said Sarasothi. 'Sathya, you come with the baby around ten o'clock. Parothi and I will go a little earlier. There may be something to churn or scrape. He and Vagdevi helped us a great deal at your wedding.'

'That's fine,' said Aithala. He thought he could arrive like a king with his new wife and Lachcha. Sarasothi bathed as soon as she got up, and left. Parothi got ready too. Before she left, she reminded her husband to bring something for the boy. 'Am I a fool?' asked Aithala.

Aithala left with Sathyabhamé and Lachcha around ten o'clock. Sheenappa's house was not more than two hundred yards away. Nevertheless, Aithala started off in great excitement as if he were going to a relative's place. As he went on his way and went around the honné trees, the tiled portal came into

view. The mango leaf festoon tied across the door looked very beautiful from the field in front. Aithala stood bewildered at the edge of the field. It was so near and yet he had failed to notice it. He wondered aloud. 'Yes,' said Sathya. 'Sheena Mayya has indeed built a big portal! You said you didn't see it. But aren't so many trees and the sand-heap right in the way?'

'Of course! If someone lends the money, one can build a portal as big as possible,' said Aithala in reply. Lachcha heard the music from the house. 'There are pipes, let's go there,' said he. They walked on quickly. Accompanied by his family, Aithala went in through the portal. Though he pretended to be indifferent, he did notice the decorative carving. 'Hm, he must have blown a lot of money!' he said to himself.

Sarasothi and Parothi , who had reached earlier, helped in the housework. Carrying Lachcha, Sathyabhamé gained the attention of the women folk. 'What a lovely boy!' said the older women, and forced her to sing. They started evaluating her gold jewellery and carried on an investigation into what had been given from Aithala's side.

Aithala went in. 'Sheena, what do you want from me? I am ready,' he said just for the sake of formality. 'There's nothing. You sit by the portal. There are fifty people here and people inside working as well. Isn't that enough?' Sheena said politely. Aithala sat in the inner yard with a silk-bordered dhoti around his knee. A young son of Sheena brought a few braided palmyra fans. Someone else brought delicious jaggery paanaka with powdered pepper and cardamom for the gentlemen who were tired after having walked in the sun. 'There is nothing to equal paanaka made from sugar and lemon to show off. But can sugar cool the body? Does it have the cooling effect of jaggery?' said a satisfied person.

'Sheena Mayya is an intelligent man. If he knew pottery, he would have made the tiles himself as well. He has done so much and pushed in a portal along with the Upanayana. What an enterprising man!' said everyone in admiration.

'Is this the first time that Sheena Mayya has shown his mettle? Don't you remember him managing Aithala's wedding?

It was by looking at his swagger that the people of Padumunnooru brought down three hundred coconuts for the brahmin assembly. If they were worthless people, they would make do with jaggery water. It was then that I thought that even those who pay a tax of thousand rupees did not possess the lordliness of our Sheena Mayya,' said another.

'This portal is witness. If he can raise such a portal in this sandy stretch without taking any loan...'

Whatever the guests might have said, Aithala stayed quiet that day. Whenever Sheena was spoken of, he used to talk of something else. However, his eyes were always drawn towards the door, frame, pillars and beams.

Lunch was over. Tasty holigé stuffed with kadalé bélé had been prepared. They had served as much as the guests wanted. By the time he ate half a holigé, Aithala felt he could eat no more. Sheena Mayya looked at what Aithala had been served. 'Serve Rama Aithala with four holigé; he is our master,' he said. Everyone stared at Aithala wondering why and wherefore he was served in this special manner. He was served with holigé and ghee and milk were poured over them. However, not even a quarter of a holigé would go down Aithala's throat comfortably.

Well, lunch was over. The great world of Kota sang the praises of Sheena Mayya's lunch. Then came the time for mantraakshathé. Sheena Mayya brought his son forward. 'I have decided to send my son to Bangalore after he has learnt japa and agnihotra rituals. brahmins should bless him and wish that God may look after him.' The boy bowed over and over before the brahmins, around twenty in number, who had gathered there. The fact that Aithala stayed dull amid all the festivities did not go unnoticed by Sheena Mayya.

One issue that kept nibbling at Aithala's mind for many days after he came back from the Upanayana lunch, was Sheena Mayya's portal and tiled roof. The desire to build a storeyed house to bring down Sheena Mayya's arrogance grew very strong. Sheena Mayya did keep visiting them, though not as often as before. Though it had been only six months since he had lent the money, Aithala wanted to get it back.

In the same manner that Sheena had taken the loan on some pretext or the other, Aithala started mentioning nonexistent problems and difficulties. He said behind Sheena's back that he would not give money to Sheena and people like him if it was to be spent on portals and bungalows just to show off. A palmyra tree in the village heard it and delivered the news to Sheena. 'This brahmin is burning with envy by looking at the tiled house I have built when no one else has. brahmins are like that. He is also a Vaidik brahmin. According to his own definition, he is a priest by profession,' said he to some people. Another palmyra tree despatched that piece of news to Aithala. On a certain day, Aithala suddenly flared up and started pacing up and down the yard. 'Did you see, Sathya, what the result is of feeding a snake with milk? I believe he says that I am jealous of his tiled roof and the portal. Can't I afford to build a house much better than his?' He jumped around in anger.

Through the tantrum and rumpus, the matter of the loan reached even Sarasothi and Parothi. Sarasothi charmed Sathyabhamé that evening and found out details like how much had been lent and when. 'Parothi, a sister didn't matter much to him. The young wife who just stepped in yesterday matters more. Let it be. What does it matter to us? He must have listened to his wife and given the loan. He comes here everyday and praises her cooking sky high. He will bring everything down in the same way,' she said.

Unable to put up a fight against Sarasothi, Aithala retorted loudly from where he sat. 'Is he going to sink my money? I won't leave him alone even if he were to go to Brahmaloka!'

~9~

The fight between Sheena Mayya and Aithala became more fierce and gradually, communication between them was heading towards a complete halt. Aithala would say that the portal was built from other people's money and Sheena would say that Aithala saved money by starving. Meanwhile, Aithala got really worked up about the money. He decided to tell Sheena that it should be paid back by the full moon of Kodi month at the latest. Sheena had a son in Bangalore earning fistfuls of money and yet he made Aithala dance around for the money he had given as loan.

The Kodi festival that year turned out to be a very special day for Aithala. There is a market town Koteshwara about ten miles from Kodi with the Kotilingeshwara temple which was personally built by the Pandavas. The big temple there, the big tank and the big festival — that was the Kodi habba for the town's people. The dream of Kodi habba was of particular significance to Aithala for two reasons. One was the time limit for the return of the money Sheena Mayya had borrowed, and other was the unexpected trouble brewing at home.

If we become aware of what went on Aithala's house, we shall also get to know how the trouble came about. Perhaps because Parothi had no child of her own, her love for Satybhame's son Lachcha was limitless. Inevitably, the feeling grew that she was Suneethi, the neglected wife, and Sathyabhamé was Suruchi the pampered one, in the story of Dhruva. Though it was true that Aithala had never spoken to her harshly, she saw the love and concern that were showered on Sathyabhamé ever since she arrived. She interpreted it as indifference towards herself and that caused her worry. But Parothi's life had been full of great hardship and would she get hurt for such worthless reasons?

Lachcha was growing. When she saw the smile of the child who was stepping into his third year, she felt proud,

believing that the child had been born to grant her salvation after death. The child could walk and didn't want to stay with his mother who never left the kitchen or the yard. He wanted to follow his elder mother, Parothi, who would spend days outside, going to the field, the beach, and other places. Wouldn't it be better if the child was away at the time of cooking? If Parothi picked up Lachcha and left, he would go on talking to cows and hens. He imitated whatever she did. Eventually, their friendship grew so deep that Lachcha was never at peace if she was not with him when he had a bath, when he ate or when he slept. This appeared convenient to Sathyabhamé in the beginning but when she realised that he was more attached to Parothi, jealousy cropped up in her heart as well.

If Parothi was given a piece of jaggery along with water, she would give him, too, a little bit. Whenever she saw this, Sathyabhamé would express her dispproval : 'What if he gets worms or his teeth go bad....?' If Parothi kept aside some snacks given to her for Lachcha, Sathyabhamé would say that she was upsetting her son's stomach. When she saw the child being taken out into the fields, she grumbled that the he was exposed to the winds and so, would get fever. One day, Aithala himself spoke out. 'Parothi, why do you take the child out in the sun? If he catches something....' Parothi stopped taking him out from that day on.

But Lachcha did not fancy the confines of the courtyard and the kitchen. What could he do if his mother was working in the kitchen? Unnoticed by her, he would toddle out and cry out for his elder mother, his Doddamma.

Early one morning in winter, Sarasothi and Parothi went off to the huruli field. They moved about, pulling out plants wet with dew. Lakka woke up, and not finding Doddamma anywhere, started screaming for her. Sathyabhamé got angry. 'He is just obsessed with Doddamma,' she said. Lachcha's sorrow and weeping increased. 'Will you stop or shall I shut you up?' the mother shouted. Scared, Lachcha kept quiet and came out. Parothi and Sarasothi had just then brought in a bundle each of huruli plants to the courtyard where the morning sun danced. Lachcha came there and saw Doddamma leaving. He

followed her quietly. By the time Parothi put up the second load on Sarasothi's head, Lachcha had arrived right there. 'Why did you leave me behind?' he asked. 'Why did you come into the cold, child? Come, let us go home,' she said and tried to carry him. Lachcha screamed and screamed. Not finding a way out, Parothi stopped working and walked around carrying him. 'What were you doing, Doddamma?' he asked. When told that she was pulling out huruli plants, he too insisted on doing it.

The morning episode was over. Sarasothi transported the remaining plants on her own. But as bad luck would have it, Lachcha broke out in a fever in the evening. It stayed on for three days without relenting. He was treated for exposure and medicated for cold. Parothi felt miserable. Why had she walked around in the field exposing him to the morning wind and chill? The mother cursed the senior wife to her heart's content, blaming her for the child's fever. Lacking the courage to say it aloud, she grumbled enough to let people hear. The child in the height of fever kept calling for Doddamma, never once mentioning his mother.

Aithala had gone on work to a town in the east for three days. Even as he stepped into the house, he called out 'Lachchanna.' The answer 'Appa' was not heard. 'He must have been taken to the field despite my instructions,' he said. When he came into the house, Sathyabhamé was crying in the verandah. Her tears sprang up when she heard Aithala's voice. 'What is it?' Aithala asked.

'The child is in bed. The fever has been very high for the last three days. What does it matter to anyone whose child it is that perishes?' she answered in a strange manner.

Aithala went inside in a hurry. Lachcha was asleep. Parothi and Sarasothi sat on either side of him. Sarasothi looked at her brother. 'He is sweating. It looks as if the fever has left him,' she said, stroking the child. The child woke up. 'Appayya,' he said, looking at his father. Aithala felt a little relieved. He embraced the child gently. 'Sarasothi, wipe off the sweat and cover him again. The child has gone down a lot.'

His sister narrated the three-day history of the fever. He listened to her without registering anything. `Whatever it be, I shall chant Gayathri a hundred and eight times,' he said. He changed, finished Sandhyavandané and sat before God. 'Sathya, bring Lachcha here,' he said. When the child was brought to him, he laid him on his crossed legs and showered the mantras like the arrows of Phalguna, one after another. He asked for a little ash, put a charm on it by chanting 'Hra-a-m, Hre-e-m, Hro-o-m,' smeared it on his forehead, put a pinch into the mouth and called out to Sathya to put him in the cradle. Sathyabhamé had put rice on the stove and could not leave it untended. Parothi, standing nearby, ran up and said, 'Let me do it.' 'Are you Sathya?' he asked. Parothi felt as if she had been struck by lightning.

Unable to stand there, she went into the cowshed. She gave gruel to the cows and sat down to milk them. But her hands shook so much that it was difficult to make the stream of milk fall straight into the pot. Seeing her sobbing, trembling a lot, and wandering from the cowshed to the house to the puja-room, Sarasothi finished the milking herself and called her for lunch.

'Why on earth should I eat?' was the answer.

Eventually, she ate at Sarasothi's insistence. As she was on her way to the tank to wash her plate after lunch, her hand shook and the plate fell down with a clatter in the verandah. Sarasothi snatched the plate from Parothi's hands and washed it herself. `Why are you acting like this, Parothi?' she asked. Parothi burst into tears instantly. 'I have turned into Poothani sent to poison infant Krishna. Who knows to how many children of other people I shall cause pain?' she cried.

'Who told you that? She did? Let her. She may say anything but who will listen?'

'She said so and he did as well. He asked me if I was Sathya when I offered to put Lachcha to bed.'

As the conversation continued, Sathyabhamé came there after lunch. She heard enough to make sure they were talking

about her and went away to the tank, coughing. When they stopped talking, she came back after washing her plate.

Finishing work in a hurry at night, Sathyabhamé went to her husband. 'They have blown up what I said into a Ramayana. They took the child early in the morning to the huruli field in the wind and mist. I said in anguish that it didn't matter if others' children died. These two have turned against me for that. "Those who talk will talk. Let them who listen, listen," they said,' she complained, and added a prelude to another fight. Meanwhile, Lachcha called out, 'Doddamma!' Everyone heard him. Though Parothi hesitated wondering why he should call only her, she couldn't stop herself. She ran to the child. Sathyabhamé had reached there before her. Parothi moved back on seeing her. 'What do you want?' the mother enquired. Lachcha said he wanted to sleep on Doddamma's lap.

'Won't it do if I rock the cradle?' Sathyabhamé asked. Lachcha started crying. Unable to find a way out, Sathyabhamé asked, 'Akka, could you put the child to sleep?' Parothi's face wrinkled up like a burnt brinjal, contorted in pain. So, Parothi sat up leaning against the wall with him on her lap. Perhaps, no one else cried as much as she did that day. Sathyabhamé couldn't bear to stay there. She got up and went to Aithala. 'I bear the child and she is the one caressing it,' she said in grief. 'Sathya, what do children know about such things? What can I do if you cry? Should I stay at home with the two of you or should I leave the house?' Aithala asked. That really was the situation he was in. Probably, there would have been judgements wholly favourable to Sathyabhama's litigation on all counts had not the sister come into his reckoning. There was no way that Aithala could set aside his fear of his sister.

By God's grace, the fever went down that very night. Lachcha started wandering around in three or four days. He kept chanting Doddamma's name all the time.

After all these incidents, there grew between Parothi and Sathyabhamé a feeling of indifference which could not be defined as natural dislike. There was no conversation between

them unless it was necessary. By the time winter, summer and the rainy season went by, the coldness between them grew in proportion to the love that Lachcha bore Parothi. He was now three years and four months old. The Koteshwara festival approached. It was the rule in Aithala's family to buy textiles on the very night of the festival. They bought clothes for the whole year then. Maybe they did so in order to wear new clothes for festivals in other places.

Sathyabhamé had never seen the Koteshwara festival which was famous in all the surrounding villages. She longed to go there. But she did not like to take on the adventure of carrying the child and walking nearly ten miles. Neither was she willing to give up the idea of going. A fortnight before the festival, she expressed her desire to attend it. Would Aithala disappoint her? He decided to buy clothes as soon as possible if they were going.

Aithala went to the market three days before the festival and bought clothes. He bought two dhotis for himself along with an upper garment, a pair of red sarees with mud-coloured border for Sarasothi, two white-bordered Palghat sarees for Parothi, and a dhoti with bugudi border for Lachcha. He thought a lot about what he should buy Sathyabhamé and turned the shop upside down many times. He didn't fancy Palghat sarees for her. Ilkal sarees were expensive. He thought deeply and decided that two Palghat sarees could do for daily use and a Kornad saree for going out. Even that seemed to him to be too expensive. Eventually, he bought a Kumarapalya saree with Rudrakshi border.

The day of the festival arrived. No one could be left behind. Sarasothi got up early in the morning, prepared gruel and asked Soorappa's wife to look after the cattle. After doing all that, she felt it was not right for everyone to leave the house. She decided to stay back and look after the house. The journey started at the break of dawn. They decided to go along the seashore. Lachcha took turns to go from Sathyabhamé to his father and then to Doddamma. Alternately carrying the child and putting him down, they travelled on and reached Koteshwara before evening fell. Lachcha was thrilled with the

big tank there. He saw the crocodiles in it and wanted to stay on watching them.

Everyone bathed in the tank. Coconuts and fruits were offered at the temple. They saw idols being placed in the chariot. Pushing through the crowd, they showed Lachcha articles laid out on the ground for sale and bought him a toy from the bead-people. At midday they started considering the various temples where they could have their lunch. Aithala had an acquaintance who lived by the banks of the tank. They all went there for lunch. The day of the festival was the day the entire empire of relatives gathered together. Then, even a lunch at a relative's became a big affair.

When everyone sat down to lunch, someone who knew Parothi asked about Sathyabhamé who was sitting next to her. 'That's my husband's wife,' said Parothi. The lady's eyes wandered over Sathyabhamé's saree. She whispered in Parothi's ear, 'How is it that you are wearing a Palghat saree and she wears one with Rudrakshi border?' 'What does it matter? Aren't they all the same?' Parothi said disinterestedly. But when the difference between the sarees which she hadn't herself noticed was pointed out, she felt hurt that she mattered less than the younger woman.

They finished lunch and went around the market yet again. Following Sathyabhamé's instructions, Aithala bought his son roasted gram, battaasu, and mandakki to eat. They bought a new pot and put everything into it. Parothi thought a lot about what she should buy for the half anna her husband had given her. Eventually, she bought some dates for Lachcha and tucked them into her saree.

By evening, Aithala's festival procession had turned around, crossed the field and reached the western sea. They all walked treading on the sands. Lachcha was tired and sleepy. He was twice as heavy when he was asleep. Sathyabhamé who couldn't carry him said it would have been better to take the main road instead of walking on the sands. 'All along the main road it is defiled. There is a crowd of Shudra children. When the festival arrives, they can't even see anything

anymore. Besides, over here is the sea and no one bothers us,' said Aithala. He didn't even realise that she had said it because she couldn't carry the child.

Looking at Sathya's predicament, Parothi said, 'Give me the child. How long can you carry him alone?' Sathya was waiting to be relieved of the weight. Parothi carried the child with great effort. After four or so miles, he woke up. They moved on, showing him the sea, making him walk in between and play in the sand. They reached home when the moon was as high as their coconut tree.

When they came home, supper was waiting for them. They washed themselves of all the impurity from the festival outing and sat down. Sarasothi had shown great zeal and had made kadubu with ground huruli for there was no black gram. Everyone ate well. Parothi described the fair to Sarasothi after dinner. She couldn't hold back her tears after telling her about the Rudrakshi-bordered saree.

Aithala did go to the Koteshwara festival, but his soul was being drawn towards Sheena Mayya. The time limit for his loan had expired. Sheena should have brought it back that very day. Aithala himself had gone out, which must have been very convenient for Sheena. Aithala felt like visiting him that night. He got up and came out but Sarasothi started talking to him. She started asking about all that was special about the festival, one by one. At the very end, she slipped in the matter of the Rudrakshi-bordered saree. Aithala's mind was in a turmoil. He felt disgusted. 'I can't start out on any work; they begin some nonsensical chatter or the other,' he thought, and came back in. He tossed about on the mat all night long. He even dreamt that Sheena had sunk all the money.

He was waiting for morning. Taking a hurried dip in the water, he rushed to Sheena's house along the beach. Meanwhile, Sheena was on his way to Aithala's house across the field. Aithala couldn't find Sheena and asked his wife where he was. She started unwinding a Ramayana in answer. She narrated how Sheena, scared about the time limit for the loan, had wandered all over town, how eventually the eldest son

Narasimha had taken a loan and sent a money order, how her husband had somehow gathered enough to repay the capital and interest and gone to Aithala's house on the day of the Kodi festival but couldn't find him. She described everything in detail. But did Aithala have the time for all that? He ran back home. They both met in the middle of the field. Sheena poured the money into Aithala's hands. 'You might not have trusted me. You might have thought I would sink your money. Now that you have got the money along with the interest, I want neither your complaints nor your money.' He just walked away. Aithala's attention was totally focussed on the money. He inspected every rupee note, tucked the cash into his waist, and looked up. Sheenappa had gone away. Aithala was happy the money had come back and happy too about Sheenappa's honesty. He felt quite bad about having distrusted him.

He wanted to tell Sheena not to get upset and forget what he had said when he needed the money. These words shouldn't be made much of, he wanted to add. Not giving him a chance to say all that, Sheena had walked away. So, Aithala went straight back home. He filled up a hole in the wall with rupee coins. He put the notes in a box and pushed it into the hole. He looked this way and that, as was his habit, and making sure that no one was around, he left home. Even Parothi did not know about the whereabouts or the worth of his treasury. Further more, his reigning queen didn't know either. He had thought many times, when in a mellow mood, of telling Sathyabhamé. Trusting the proverb that a woman's intellect would spell the world's doom, he kept quiet.

As he left home with a smile on his face, he met Sarasothi. She asked if he had gone to Sheena's house and got back the money. 'Where can he go? Do you think I would let him get away if he didn't pay up?' 'See,' Sarasothi said, 'You talked to all sorts of people and said he had sunk your money. You spoilt a good relationship.'

Though Aithala seemed to be indifferent to what she had said, he did grieve deeply within. So he stepped along the beach yet again to Sheena Mayya's house. He was sitting in the courtyard braiding coconut fronds. Sheena felt a little

concerned when he saw Aithala and asked if there were any counterfeit coins among the ones he had given. 'Why do you get angry, Mayya? I might have said a word or two by mistake. Let's say that you have done so too. No more than that. Let's forget it all. I wanted to say all this to you but you had walked away before I could. I was feeling very uneasy within.' When Aithala opened himself up like this, Sheena felt much better. 'Leave it be, Aithalaré. Whatever has happened has happened.' He put an end to the matter and raised others : the Koteshwara festival, the making of battasu which had come down from the hills, people at the festival, the great wonder of bringing over raw mangoes from somewhere as early as the Kodi month for the chariot festival — all these matters were discussed one after another.

* * *

They came to terms for that particular day. Though they did not express great fondness towards each other for quite a few days, they did not think of openly expressing either indifference or hostility. However, the pain within Aithala regarding the portal didn't leave him. There was no way it would, either. Ever since he built it, Sheena became Sheenappa Mayya in the village and greater respect was shown to him. He was not considered a bankrupt anymore. Aithala's latent jealousy erupted because of this. 'Well, if he eats well, what would have lasted him for a year won't last for six months. Now he has become a rich man in Kodi and Kanyana villages. I, son of Kodanda Aithala, am just called a Vaidik brahmin because I was tight-fisted,' he thought. Why shouldn't he build a storeyed house which would surpass Sheena's portal? But he wasn't bold enough to do it. It was possible, all right, if he put his hand into the hole in the wall. But the main problem was the manner in which he could announce the new project at home. Sathyabhamé would jump at the idea if he mentioned it. She came from a rich household. Parothi would be bewildered and say she shouldn't be asked for she knew nothing about such things. She didn't have the power to comprehend such matters. But the matter could not be placed before his sister. Nor could it be avoided. 'If you have too

much money, throw it into the estuary. Isn't this house enough for us as it is?' she might ask. If work started without her knowledge, she might leave home without thinking twice. If she did, the rice she received from her husband's house would be lost. Moreover, it was Sarasothi who looked after the farming activities and many other things.

Well, for months on end, the matter kept bothering him. Even then, there was no bold decision taken. At the same time, another important matter came up. Sathyabhamé was to become a mother again. Her term was approaching. Where would she have the baby? ' Why should she be sent to Padumunnooru? Aren't we both here?' asked Sarasothi. Parothi threw cold water on her suggestion. ' Let her decide. If she says that things were not done properly, differences will arise later,' she said. To add to it, Madappayya from Padumunnooru sent his son over three times. 'Let Sathya come here. All said and done, no other place will be as comforting as the mother's,' he said, showing eagerness. The matter came up when Aithala visited him once. 'How can we give you all the responsibility yet again?' he asked. 'Your thinking isn't right. I had eight sisters. It is immaterial how many are alive today, but when they were all alive, they came here to have their children. My mother never left her daughters with her sons-in-law.' Aithala said he would consider it and came home. When he asked Sathyabhamé, she expressed her inclination to go to her mother's place.

Aithala looked at the almanac, found the right star and day and journeyed at the auspicious moment to Padumunnooru with his wife. Lachcha was just over three-and-a-half years old. He lisped beautifully. A decision about what to do with him had to be made at the last moment. The father thought that the mother might find it difficult to look after both children when the baby arrived. Sarasothi felt it would be better if the boy stayed back. 'Why should we take on the responsibility?' was what Parothi felt. Amidst all these uncertainties, Sathyabhamé said in an insinuating manner, 'My child is not a burden to me.' So, when they were leaving Lachcha too joined them saying that he was going to his grandfather's house.

They reached Padumunnooru and were duly welcomed and looked after. Aithala had lunch there and started back home. 'Lachchanna, stay with Amma. There is grandfather to give you cashewnuts and jaggery,' said Aithala but Lachchanna decided to travel back with him. 'I don't want jaggery. I don't want cashewnuts either,' he said.

'What else do you want?'

'Doddamma.'

Aithala had to accept defeat. Since Lachcha was very obstinate, he travelled back home carrying Lachcha for a distance. By the time he reached home. Lachcha was fast asleep. From that night until Sathyabhamé returned, it was as if Doddamma had acquired a pot of treasure to be guarded. He was indeed a pot full of love for his Doddamma. His love knew no bounds. But Doddamma's mind was just as full with fear of the younger wife. Her fear grew very strong as time passed, when she imagined how angry Sathya would get at the growing bond between them; who knew what cracks it would cause at home?

Within a fortnight of Makara Sankranthi, good news reached Aithala from Padumunnooru. On a full moon day, Sathyabhamé became a mother of another child – a baby girl. In order to inform people at home, Aithala called Lachcha and said, 'Lachcha, you have a tiny little sister.'

'I don't want a sister or anyone else. Doddamma is quite enough for me,' said Lachcha. Doddamma had to make him feel good about his little sister. 'No, child. Won't you be able to play with a lovely little sister when she comes home? You can sit in the courtyard and play channemané.' Lachcha suddenly remembered the game and asked Doddamma to get ready for the game then and there. She brought the board and seeds and sat down to play with him. It was time for her to cook. 'Shouldn't I go and cook? We shall play after lunch,' she said.

'I shall play by myself.'

'That's why I said you can play with your sister when I am not there.'

'What is a sister, Doddamma?'

Doddamma laughed.

~10~

The longing for a tiled house never left Aithala. But he did not have courage to proceed in that direction. So he kept quiet. He was of the opinion that even if he did build a house like that, Sheena Mayya would not withhold himself from saying that the Aithala boy built a tiled house merely out of jealousy. So he thought of doing something else that would dazzle Sheena. Aithu Poojari had a lovely coconut grove next to his in Kodi. Compared to his own, which had barely seventy trees, that grove looked like a garden from heaven. Young trees whose bunches of fruit you could touch by just extending your arm. Some time ago, he had indeed noticed it. Facing financial problems, Aithu Poojari had come to him. 'Odeya, you can either buy the coconut grove or keep it as surety and give me five hundred rupees,' he had said. Aithala wasn't bold enough then. He had strong memories of the edge of his field being washed away into the estuary in the year of his marriage. Even after a few years, the estuary stayed very close to his field. But now the situation had changed. For the last fifteen years, nearly a hundred-yard-long sand bank had been added in the north, and the estuary was wreaking vengeance on the southern bank. Consequently, he felt that if Poojari's land was bought, there would be no problem from the estuary for another fifty years at least. Moreover, Poojari had built a stone embankment by the river. Aithala wanted to speak to him again.

His Eminence Aithu, gradually sinking in debt, once met Aithala. It was morning and Aithu's tall body had cast a

shadow twice as long on the beach. Escaping from it and standing as far as possible from him, Aithala asked, 'Poojari, whom did you finally sell your grove to?'

'Ayya, how can I sell it until I get the right buyer? Sheena Mayya has said that he would consider buying it.'

'How can Sheena Mayya have so much money? He must have said it just to show off.'

'Ayya, it seems two of his children are now in Bangalore. They and their brother-in-law have together opened a hotel of their own. There is a lot of income from it, they say.'

Aithala was slightly confused and he started counting the grains of sand on the beach. It was because he had just then learnt the fact that Mayya's boys had opened a hotel of their own. He only knew that they were working in a hotel.

'But he says he doesn't want it if it is over four hundred rupees. That wouldn't even amount to four rupees a tree. Can't that be earned in two years by selling coconuts?'

'Do you intend to sell it for that much?'

'How can I give it, Odeya? There are over two hundred trees. Even if there is a famine, one tree will produce between one hundred fifty and two hundred coconuts. Even if I were to give it for toddy, I shall get enough money. If even ten of the trees are numbered by the government, I shall get forty rupees.'

'Oh, it looks as if your estimate touches the top of the coconut tree.'

'How can you say that, Odeya? I never say a word unless it is appropriate. The only threat is the estuary. Otherwise, it could even be worth a thousand rupees. So, why can't I get at least six hundred rupees?'

Aithala looked around. Suspecting that if he didn't intervene, the grove would be taken over by Sheena Mayya, he offered five hundred rupees for it as before. 'We shall have it registered as soon as I get the money. But, until then, not a human being should come to know about it,' Aithala gave directions and left.

Within two months of these negotiations, Aithala became the owner of the coconut grove. However, he did not publicise the matter. Nor did Poojari. Sheena Mayya thought he would give Poojari two hundred rupees and ask for a time limit for the other two hundred. He was sure that Poojari wouldn't be offered that kind of money by anyone around there. So, when he went to Poojari's home and talked about it, the answer he got was that it had been sold. Sheena Mayya's heart sank. 'For how much and to whom?'

'I sold it to Aithala Odeya for five hundred. Even that is a loss. But I had money problems. On the other hand, there are young trees about to bear fruit. I really didn't want to sell.'

'Where will you go, leaving your farm?'

'I shall stay on and work for him. God willing, I shall open a toddy shop and cultivate another field. Will this be as profitable as the other one, Odeya?'

'You are foolish. I was prepared to give nine hundred. I kept quiet as there was no point talking about it until I had the cash. If you had sold it today, I would have given you six hundred with my eyes closed,' Sheena Mayya said, feeding Poojari's desire.

Now, it was the turn of Sheena Mayya to feel jealous. He didn't like Aithala becoming the owner of the farm at all. 'It doesn't matter. If he starts buying property from the money he gets as dakshiné I can buy the whole town one day with the earnings of my children,' he consoled himself. His spirit of adventure was stirred. To equal that, Lakshmi Narasimha Prasanna, the hotel run by his two sons and brother-in-law, flourished with great splendour. His son Narasimha wrote, 'Now people from Kengeri and Bidadi also come to eat our special masala dosé.' Business was very good and every month Mayya received a money order for fifty rupees. He was overjoyed and sent off the third son after Upanayana along with his two other sons. He had decided to send his fourth son, Orata, as well, after the Saligrama feast. If they were all from the same household, there would be trust and a lot of

profit could be raked in as well. That was Sheena Mayya's firm belief.

Now that coins had started jingling in his hands, would not the thought of spending them on good property come to Sheena Mayya? So, he started getting information from people about who needed loans on property or wanted to sell. If he was aware that there were other buyers, he would offer a higher price. If he knew that Aithala had his eye on something, he wouldn't worry about paying a hundred or two hundred more. The outcome of this competition was that small fields, wherever they stood, were all sold to Sheena Mayya. What more was there to say? Two small fields on either side of Aithala's seedbed were now in Sheena Mayya's name.

Aithala was angry and bewildered when he heard the news. 'Isn't there a method even for acquiring property? I bought Poojari's field because it was adjacent to mine. Would I have bought it if it was elsewhere? His transactions are not like mine. What use is this small field to him? He has bought four very small fields in Manooru. Is he going to cultivate them? Buying land where you can't even turn a plough around is only for giving tax and you won't get any returns from it,' he said.

Was Sheena Mayya a fool? His mind was following another track. People who sell property are the ones with small farms. Prosperous people don't sell. Hence there was the consolation that he could hold sway over a few people. One could look at Aithala's seedbed itself. His field for sowing seeds was also a fairly small one. The fields on three sides belonged to Sheena Mayya. The one on the fourth side belonged to someone else. If Sheena Mayya bought it somehow and fenced his areas, Aithala's land would become an island. He would have to sell it to Sheena Mayya himself. Then, all the fields could be combined into a bigger area for cultivation. Even if it didn't happen eventually, he could always torture Aithala. Sheena's aim was that there should be no one in the village who wasn't either indebted to him or scared of him. Sheena Mayya's theory was that acquiring property was like playing a game of chess.

Within six to eight months of Sheena Mayya's eldest son going to Bangalore, four others went as well. Their Balepeté hotel matured and gave birth to small hotels in Taragupeté and Chikkapeté as well. Over here, by God's grace, with a son born every two years, Sheena Mayya was now the father of eight sons. 'God willing, I may get a bride for Narasimha. I shall celebrate a wedding surpassing Aithala's second marriage. On the wedding day there will be such a variety of fireworks – Bedikamba, Lankapattana and rockets – from Manooru till Kodi, from the sea to Barakooru, and the earth will tremble!' he thought boldly.

It was true that the world wouldn't be taken in by Sheena Mayya's words. But those who knew that he was getting rich came to him for loans from tens to thousands. He never put his money in one place. When Perampalli Vasudeva Gurikara was in trouble and found no way of paying money to the government, he asked Sheena Mayya for a loan. Sheena was proud that he had given five hundred rupees to the Gurikara without a bond. Realising that the day for repayment was far off, he went frequently to the Gurikara's house and eventually turned it into a loan with security. What was surprising about Sheena turning out to be a big man when he could give a loan to the headman? Sheena who was seen loitering in Vaidiks' weddings and Upanayanas, was now ready to claim a pride of place in the company of Gurikaras. Alongside, he started giving temporary loans with compound interest to people who were ignorant of arithmetic. Consequently, as he himself said, 'All the Mogeras, the fisherfolk of Maribalé, started bowing before me on bended knee.'

Once, Sheena Mayya had gone to a wedding at the Gurikara's. His daughter was getting married to the son of the headman of the next village. It was not the ordinary kind of hospitality that Sheena received there. Rama Aithala was also there, resplendent among the brahmins. According to the custom of their household, everyone had drinks with sugar in a silver container. Vaidika Aithala got it in a big bronze beaker, and just once.

Nagamma of Basrooru hadn't stayed away from a prosperous Gurikara wedding so far. But now that she was old, she wouldn't dance. She played the violin instead. Her young daughters Rajeevi and Chandu were Bharatanatya dancers. After the dance, it was time to honour the Gurikaras. If one called Rajeevi to give the salutation, another would call Chandu. On that day, Sheena Mayya was saluted eighteen times with 'Sheena Mayya Maharaj *ke daulat zada.*' He didn't think twice about rewarding them. It was twice eighteen, or thirty six, which amounted to nine four anna pieces. Rama Aithala didn't receive any salutation at all and his face fell. There was no way brahmins could buy such things. Nevertheless, he didn't very much like the fact that Sheena Mayya had gained entry into that class and received so much honour. It was no wonder that Sheena Mayya was spoken of with such respect.

After coming home, Aithala told Sathyabhamé, 'That Sheena doesn't even see people like us anymore. He gets salutations from cheap prostitutes. He wasted nine four anna bits and had eighteen salutations given on his behalf. What is so big about adding water to coffee and selling it there in Bangalore, and splurging what his children have earned on people here who wear bells on their ankles? It's no big deal.' Sathya showed a lot of sympathy. She knew that he was greatly hurt. 'Who cares who loses money? We don't want to follow this worthless path,' she advised him.

But Aithala didn't let go. He caught hold of a friend and put together a tale to be carried to Narasimha in Bangalore. 'You sweat it out there and make money. Here, your father in his advanced years is wasting it all away on prostitutes.' The boy was alarmed at first but was consoled by what his uncle said. 'Someone who dislikes him is making mischief.'

Yugadi arrived. Narasimha who hadn't been home for three years came down for just a week. Sheenappa Mayya heard about the splendour of their three hotels in Bangalore from his son himself. He decided that God Narasimha had changed the luck of his family. Narasimha was eighteen years old then. He had moved up the job ladder in the hotel and

was now the owner. He had come home to ask his father to find an organised way to spend the money being made in abundance through the efforts of his Mava, his uncle. 'Mava says that some good property should be bought.' he said. His father said laughingly, 'Is he the only one with intelligence? What do you think I'm doing with the money you are sending?' He gave his son the details. Narasimha already knew that. 'But Mava says it is better to have the property in one place instead of having bits here and bits there. What is the use when it can't be leased out?' The message was thus delivered. He also asked that approximately forty thousand rupees of property be kept in his uncle's name.

Sheena Mayya was troubled. It was convenient to harass others with the property he had acquired, but he didn't have the means to cultivate it himself. He knew he could not escape the problems of leasing and struggling to get the returns. He was earning quite a bit of interest on the loans he had given. But the interest on what he had lent the Gurikara had not been paid. All those reasons suggested to him that it was better to follow his brother-in-law's instruction. If he hadn't been supportive, Narasimha's ownership of the hotels might not have been possible. 'Narasimha, you have a point. Let's do so,' he said. He quickly brought up the subject of Narasimha's marriage at the same time. 'Not now. It is time I went back to Bangalore,' Narasimha said.

When he left, he took the fourth child along with him. He also gave his father a message from his uncle that he should stay with them in Bangalore for two months after sowing was over. This dream crystallised in Sheena Mayya's mind. He thought about his journey to Bangalore with the same excitement as going on a pilgrimage to Kashi.

Summer was over and the rainy season began. Sheena Mayya's cultivation got over in a great hurry. He thought of going to Shivamoggé when the rains subsided and catching a train from there to Bangalore. But, how could he reach Shivamoggé? Though his children would walk the distance in a few stages, he had to maintain his dignity and go by cart. He would ask for a cart from the Gurikara who couldn't

refuse. But how could the rivers in between be crossed? How could one go up the Agumbé hills against the wind and rain? If he abandoned the idea of the cart and walked up at least till the hills, would leeches not suck his blood? These worries rolled along one after another. He was strong enough to walk. He could certainly walk. It was not as if he did not know how. But, would it become his status which was on par with that of the Gurikaras? The children were sending him hundreds of rupees every month. Wouldn't everyone make fun of him if he walked?

In those days, walking from one place to another was nothing extraordinary for people in the village. It was customary for even eight-year-old children to walk to Shringeri during Navarathri. Would it not rain during Navarathri? A few years ago, hadn't his wife walked to that place with other women because they would be given sarees for free? Though all this was true, Mayya was still hesitant. He went to visit the prosperous people by the harbour, thought for long, and informed his children that he couldn't come before the harvest and that he wasn't very well either. He had no problem wandering all over, laying down rules, carrying on idle chatter and showing off his might. The children, who were expecting their father to arrive, were greatly disappointed. They wrote back to tell him that he should come without fail after Deepavali at least.

Though he was disappointed at not having gone to Bangalore, his mind stayed buoyant when fifty to a hundred rupees kept arriving every month. He was on the lookout for property worth three thousand rupees for his brother-in-law. Ostentatiously he asked those that possessed property and those that didn't, those that would sell and those that wouldn't, whether they knew of any good property for sale. He indicated by the way he talked that he had the ability to produce ten thousand rupees all at once.

Another important event occurred in Sheena Mayya's life before harvesting was over. Preparations were afoot for another wedding among the Gurikaras. Vasudeva Gurikara was the manager of the property of their joint family. The

wedding that had taken place earlier where Sheena Mayya had received *'daulat zada'* one after another was that of his own daughter. This time it was the wedding of his big brother's son. Vasudeva Gurikara did not desire to perform the wedding of his dead brother's son with the same grandeur as his own daughter's. Desire was one thing; besides, there were not enough facilities. So they planned for a monsoon wedding. They had chosen a girl from a village near Kokkarané which was ten or twelve miles east from where they lived. The girl's family was rich. All three children were girls. So, with the assurance that a third of the property would be theirs, the wedding had been fixed. They had gone ahead with the preparations, calculating that one could count on the fingers the number of people who would attend the wedding in the rainy season. There was no doubt that Sheena Mayya too was among the fingers to be counted.

It was decided that the wedding party would leave in the afternoon itself since it would be a moonlit night. If the rain let up for a little while, as it had done so far, they would be able to travel twelve miles by boat to Kokkarané. There was no good cart track either. Therefore, everyone seemed to prefer the journey by boat. But there was just one drawback – the rain. If it so willed and the wind blew strong, reaching Kokkarané alive would be the same as completing a pilgrimage to Kashi. Nevertheless, a pledge of a thousand coconuts was made to Aneguddé Siddhi Vinayaka and the wedding party left with courage in their hearts.

The important people in the family of the headman, the priests, the bridegroom and a few eminent people like Sheena Mayya were among the party. They said that the pipers could walk up and join them the next day. But it was imperative on auspicious occasions among the Gurikaras that the musicians travel along with them. Consequently, the women of the household and the priests sat in a big boat. Gurikararu, Mayya, violinist Nagamma, her two daughters, Rajeevi and Chandu, and accompanist Subba sailed off in a boat just before sunset. The boat moved on smoothly.

While there was still light, the boat sailed beside the coconut groves, among the beautiful islands. They passed

Barakooru as well. They had yet to travel for six or seven miles. If the wind was favourable and the clouds few and far between, they could reach Kokkarané by nightfall. There, they could reach the quarters reserved for them on time. 'Aneguddé Ganapathi will see us through,' said Gurikara. 'God won't forsake us,' said violinist Nagamma.

Anyway, the boat moved on and darkness fell. The moon appeared in the sky. The river travel was pleasant like the experience of swaying in a dream. Gurikara quietly called the musicians. 'There are no pipes. Instead of moving on with idle chat, we can listen to the violin and Rajeevi's singing,' he suggested. When the man of taste said that, Sheena Mayya joined in as if he knew the pleasures of music. ' Gurikararé, Rajeevi's dancing and singing were so good at your family's wedding. Rajeevi's sister is no less a singer,' he said in praise. So, in mid-river, they got ready for music with enthusiasm. Singing started. Gurikara, like one who had a taste for music, asked for this song and that. 'Sing *Natch Chum Chum,'* he asked. 'Whatever she sings is good,' added Mayya. Caught up in the attraction of music and the musicians, Gurikara and Mayya carried on till they were awakened from their dreams by the patter of raindrops on their backs. Their boat had been left behind. The one ahead had gone beyond calling distance.

'Oh, it's just a drizzle. It will stop now. There is no need to get the violin wet,' said Mayya. The leader of the musicians asked Mayya if he had forgotten his pouch of betel leaves and arecanuts. By the time he took it out, the wind started blowing. The rain fell heavily too. The boatman could not see four yards ahead of him. He tried as hard as he could to reach the banks so they wouldn't stay midstream. In the rain and wind, everyone was drenched. The Gurikara was anxious about the boat that had gone ahead. In the hammering rain, it was difficult to hear even the ones nearby. How could one expect shouts, however loud, to be heard by those far away?

The boat managed somehow to reach the bank. It was not one that could be climbed on to. There were clumps of strong grass by the side, as tall as a man. The boat stopped there, unable to go backwards or forwards. Despite holding up

umbrellas, everyone got wet. Water had collected in the boat to form a tank. Everyone shivered in the cold. But what could be done? There was no reaching the bank unless the rain stopped. It was not possible to inform anyone where they were. Sheena Mayya wondered whether he should have got involved in the commotion of the wedding party after cancelling his trip to Bangalore.

Everyone experienced hell for some time. The wind and rain moved away as swiftly as they had set in. The sky became clear. Moonlight flowed like money and made the river smile. A servant asked if he could take the boat further. 'What is the point in stopping here? Will there be a house nearby?' asked the Gurikara. 'We have to go at least three miles to find a house. In another mile and a half we will reach Kokkarané. Anyway, when Aneguddé Ganapathi himself cheated us, what can men do? Shout loudly for the boat ahead.' However loud the servant shouted, there was no reply. 'They might have gone far ahead,' said the boatmen.

The boat started sailing again in midstream. All those who were drenched decided to squeeze out water from their clothes and keep them on. Apart from the musicians, the clothes of the others were in the boat in front. Sheena Mayya was miserable because he had to suffer in the cold. However, on the whole, he thought that the happenings were to his advantage. In the moonlight, the Gurikara was whispering something in his ears. Mayya was smiling and looking stealthily with his left eye at the beauty of Rajeevi and Chandu.

By the time he reached Kokkarané, the misery and experience of the rain had been forgotten and unprecedented sweet dreams had arisen in his mind.

When their boat reached Kokkarané market, the bride's people were standing there with flares. The other boat had reached an hour earlier. The people in it had faced a little drizzle and wind and had reached their quarters quickly.

'Why should unkind fate which no one else faced come over us?' asked Sheena Mayya as he alighted. 'Someone here had bad luck and all of us had to suffer,' said Nagamma.

People looked at one another to find out who it was, and they all laughed. The Gurikara reached the place arranged for their stay, followed by his retinue. There they were met with great hospitality. 'Let's eat something hot and sleep in the cold,' Sheena Mayya said. Nagamma teased him. 'Sheena Mayyaré, has there been a death or are there obsequies to perform, for us to lie down wearing wet clothes?' 'No one can escape your tongue,' Sheena replied. 'It appears as if you have lodged in her mouth!' Rajeevi said. That was the first time that she had talked to Sheena Mayya, smiling and winking. He said, 'The daughter appears bolder than the mother,' not knowing what else to say. 'They are the children of today,' the mother said jokingly.

Incomparable food and hospitality were provided. They slept wherever they were told to becaue it was late. The Gurikara established himself in a room with Sheena Mayya, saying that he wasn't feeling sleepy. A plate of betel leaves and arecanuts appeared in front of them. Drummer Subba came to ask for tobacco. The Gurikara said in a quiet voice that there was no charm in it since there was no one to prepare the betel leaves.

Nagamma, Chandu and Rajeevi came across as soon as the invitation was given. While Nagamma spent time talking in a clever manner, Chandu and Rajeevi gratified the Gurikara and Mayya respectively with betel leaves. Nagamma left, saying that it was late.

The night passed. By the time the headmen woke up, it was already late morning. Breakfast awaited them. They finished their morning ablutions quickly. The Gurikara visited the bride's place with Sheena Mayya. He looked at the pandal and hospitality arrangements. The bride's people suggested they could stay on for a few more days. Sheena Mayya said that if the whole wedding party stayed there, it would be congested. Their own quarters were good, as well. Those who could walk could stay there. It wasn't far off, after all. It wasn't even as far as the distance from Kodi to Perampalli. Those who weren't keen on walking could stay on. The Gurikara agreed.

That evening they started making pledges to deities, wishing that the rain god and Aneguddé Ganapathi would bless them as well. Though it was true that Vinayaka had got half of them drenched, there was no one else they could ask for help. Maybe the God heard their prayers. Until the rituals of the wedding were over, there wasn't a drop of rain. After that, it rained very heavily for some time. The salutation programme of the musicians could not be conducted. The upsurge of enthusiasm for receiving salutations shown by the Gurikara and Mayya seemed to have been choked midway.

After dinner, the Gurikara and Mayya left for their quarters. The musicians said they wouldn't be able to sleep at all in the commotion of the wedding house. Though it was decided that only men who were keen could go to the quarters, Rajeevi, Chandu and Nagamma also joined them.

The commotion in the quarters during the four days of the wedding was second to none. If one saw the music, dancing and consumption of betel leaves which went on with the rituals, it would be difficult to say where exactly the wedding was taking place. However, the wedding went on for four days with great pomp. Those who wanted hospitality, particularly the ones who found contentment in the dalliance of Chandu and Rajeevi, got their fill. After four days, night journey was abandoned and boats had to leave during the day on the insistence of the women. While returning, they were all cooked in the heat of the sun instead of facing the havoc played by the rain. Anyhow, they all reached home by the end of the afternoon.

But they were not happy to return home. Sending Rajeevi off to Basrooru was very painful. Sheena Mayya was not by any means a man of taste, and he felt great tenderness and love for her because of the way she had refined him. 'Mayyaré, you will come to Kundapura some day or the other. Please visit these children of poor people at least once,' she said. From that very moment, he was immersed in speculating about when he would have some business in Kundapura.

The news of the wedding spread all over the village. Rama Aithala had been invited for the first wedding. As he

was wondering about the reason for not having been invited this time, he was informed that the party had returned. Within a few days, the news of Sheena Mayya's new adventures reached his ears. 'Well! Well! Has the headman of Kodi become the brother-in-law of the headman of Perampalli?' he thought, and smiled. There was venom in that smile.

~11~

At the time of Rama Aithala's daughter's birth. Lachcha was over three-and-a-half years old. Sathyabhamé came home with her daughter. Their coming had no special effect on the boy. Though Sathyabhamé spent time in nurturing and petting the infant, Lachcha didn't seem to mind it at all.

The reason was merely that he had grown up greatly loved by his Doddamma instead of being a child to his mother. If he saw his mother's face four times after his sister's arrival at home, he saw his Doddamma fourteen times. It was another matter whether Sathyabhamé approved or not. She would call her son, 'Lachcha, won't you play with your sister?' 'I don't want a sister,' the reply would come. 'Won't you play with me?' she would ask. 'You carry me,' he would say. 'Put sister down on the floor.' She couldn't do that. So they would both be naturally frustrated, and he would feel hurt, thinking he was born to her in order to be brought up by others.

Parothi would never show her fondness for Lachcha in the house however much the boy talked to her. Once the threshold was crossed, there would be unbounded closeness between Lachcha and Parothi. There was such love within her that even her desire to have borne a son had dried up. On account of that, Sathyabhamé became a mother to Lachcha only in name. This grief became stronger in Sathyabhamé as days passed. Rama Aithala had no time to sit at home playing with his son. However, he would talk to him when he came

home in the evening. He would notice that the boy was always with his Doddamma. He knew there was no use scolding the boy for that. Would Sathya not speak of her pain before her husband? ' Tomorrow, if this Subbi grows up and goes behind her Doddamma, it means that I am around only to bear the pain of childbirth,' she would moan. Aithala could measure the depth of her pain but could not see a way out.

Lachcha was almost five years old. It was then that a way out suggested itself to the parents. 'Doesn't Lachcha need education? He can be sent to the government school in Malpé. If he grows up in his grandfather's house, he might grow up to be a respectable person,' Sathyabhamé suggested. Aithala didn't want the child to stay away from him. 'What's the big hurry?' he asked. As soon as the boy was five years old, Sarasothi said, 'Anna, on the padya of Navarathri, Lachcha should be sent to Shankara Aii's school. Shouldn't the boy learn the salutation to Ganesha and write it at least? Perampalli Vasudeva Gurikara's children, it seems, attend a school in Kundapura or Udupi to learn English. Lachcha doesn't need all that. It is enough if he learns to read aloud the Bhagavatha or Ramayana.' 'Why are you in such a hurry? Lachcha can go to Aii's matha, the conventional Sanskrit school. But he won't last four days with his sort of punishment – parangimané, kodanda, and beating with tamarind branches,' Aithala said.

'What! Is Shankara going to beat our boy?'

'What does it matter to him whose child it is? Didn't he give the kodanda treatment even to Sheena Mayya's son, Orata? Haven't you heard about the mishap when the child fell on the thorns below? Sheena Mayya is no less cruel in administering the law. It seems he went to school and shouted at the teacher who in turn expelled the child from school saying that Sheena himself could teach the boy. But the boy is going to the same school now. Now, if he needs to learn writing, he has to go to the Manooru school or the government school across the river. Is it possible for small children to cross the river every day?' 'A curse on it! Nothing is lost if there is no reading or writing. There is no need for it at all.

All that is for the children of the Gurikara. If he studies the Ashtaka like you, that will be enough. Shouldn't there be someone to become a priest after you?'

Anyway, the conversation didn't go further that day. Aithala prolonged the moment, saying that Navarathri was still three months away and that there was no hurry. But his mind was in a turmoil. What was the use in sending his only son to a government school? Who would continue his Vaidik profession after him? Instead of going to school, the boy could study at home. He could be taught a few Ashtottara and taken out on rounds here and there after his Upanayana. He would then become a committed Vaidik like him. This was one way open to him. But his mind had been caught for several days in a whirl of another mode of thought. Vastheva Gurikara's son had trained to be a lawyer in Kundapura and returned. He had heard that complainants were lining up like ants to go to him, and pouring out money. He thought of something that was forbidden. 'Why shouldn't my son become a lawyer?' Moreover, he wasn't content with the idea of Lachcha becoming just a priest. The reason was that he had seen Sheena Mayya's children going to Bangalore even before they could walk, and earning heaps of money. He knew how much respect Sheena had acquired and how he flaunted it. When Sheena had become the Gurikara, why couldn't he attain fame from his son? If Sheena's sons could make money by washing cups in Bangalore, why couldn't his son learn English and rake in money here itself? He started dreaming.

The dream left him numb for quite a few days. One day, Shankar Aii, the teacher, came to his house but Aithala was out. Sarasothi came out when he called to find out if anyone was at home and told him that her brother might be back only in the evening. She asked him in and offered him hospitality. The teacher said that he didn't have much time to spare. 'I was going to school and came here on my way. Your boy will be five years old at Vijayadashami. I wanted to tell you that you can send him to my school.'

'I have spoken to my brother. But I don't know whether it is true or not – the children are scared of the punishment

meted out to them. We haven't hit Lachcha even once till now.'

'Amma, people will say anything. However, there is a teacher in Manooru. He wants children from Kodi as well to come to his school. Maybe he started spreading false rumours. Who knows?'

'It's not something we have seen ourselves. It's just hearsay.... Anyway, it is fine if the boy is not going to be hit.'

'But I can't teach him without touching him at all. When I was going to school, we used to be punished with a tamarind birch at least once in eight days. I don't hit any child even a tenth of that measure. But if I were to say that I won't hit any child at all, there would be no fear among the children and neither would they learn. Tell me, does butter melt without heat?'

He talked, ate the jaggery placed before him, finished drinking water and spoke. 'What will you tell your brother about sending the boy to school? No one who comes to school on Vijayadashami day will ever fall behind.'

'Don't government schools think the same way? Don't they observe Vijayadashami?'

'The government has no such considerations. There is a school in Karkada. Children come on any day and at any time. They have school on Ekadashi and Amavasyé, like the shandy at Kundapura. What do they care about good days and bad ones? Do you have ideas of sending your boy to that place? Such defilement! Children of oil millers and brahmins slouch about together on rows of benches.'

'Really? Is that possible? If our boy goes there, will all children sit in the same line with him?'

'That's the government's dispensation for you! I won't let a soul into my school except brahmins. Nagappa Shetty on the other side of our field had sent word, asking if I could teach a couple of Yakshagana episodes to his boys. I said that those who were interested in teaching his boys could do so but I wasn't going to teach people of all sorts of castes.'

'Doesn't the government have any rules at all?'

'If the government carries on like this to for another ten years, no one from the lower classes will come to hold the plough. Then, brahmins will have to pick it up.'

Shankara teacher left, saying that it was late for school. He asked her to inform her brother. He would go to a few more houses, chat for a while in every house and reach school. His own house did not have enough space and so he was running his great school at the big rice-pounding yard of one of the villagers. Up to now, there were never less than three children in the school. Nor were there more than six. But for all the three villages, Kanyana, Kodi and Padukeré, he was the lone Dronacharya. He was teaching the new generation of children but the elders were taught by his father, Narayana Aii, who had forty six Yakshagana prasangas dancing on the tip of his tongue. He had taught at least ten or twelve prasangas to all those who had suffered hardship for many years at his school. Over and above all that it was imperative that they learnt the tables, documentation, elaboration of notes and writing on palmyra leaf. They did not desecrate Sharada, the Goddess of learning, by writing either on slate or paper.

Though Shankara teacher did not know so many stories, there was no dearth in him of popular stories like Meenakshi Kalyana, Karnarjuna Kalaga, Babruvahana Kalaga and Indra Keelaka. Moreover, he was a deft hand at drumming. He explained the meaning of Bhagavatha and Ramayana in a pleasing manner. Since he had a good voice, no programme of taala maddalé ever started without him. But everyone agreed that he had a fault. His beating hand was firmer than his drumming hand. If anyone criticised him openly, he would ask in return, 'Do you know how much my father has beaten me? Does education come to you just by offering puja? Education favours those who bend their backs.' If anyone were to say, 'Aiigalé, it is not that you shouldn't beat children. But it is too much. They will go up the honné tree and hide there in fear instead of going to school.' 'If people at home behaved like me as well, children will not stay near the honné tree or climb

it. Children shouldn't be treated leniently. If they get a beating today, they can eat kadubu tomorrow,' he would say, and shut him up. He knew it was possible to stop older people from talking but wasn't aware that it was difficult to please the younger ones. Consequently, he had to be content with the six measures of rice from his six pupils. Though a few coconuts and greens arrived, Shankara's school couldn't have survived without his cultivating the land.

After hearing his lecture, there was revulsion for government schools in Sarasothi's mind for a long time. Should one born in a brahmin family get educated in a government school? The anxiety grew strong.

When Aithala came come and sat down for dinner, Sarasothi came and told him that Shankara Aii had come. Conversation naturally turned towards Lachcha's future. Aithala thought about it seriously and spoke as if he had arrived at a decision. 'Our Lachcha may not go to the matha for a few days, scared of the beating given by the teacher. Moreover, a child's future will not be assured merely through Yakshagana and taala maddalé. You know how much respect I get from being a priest. You also know what respect Sheena commands because he has found a way of making money by running hotels.'

'If so, are you thinking of sending your Lachcha to a hotel somewhere?'

'Thoo! I don't want any money made by selling food. He might as well live off the produce from my five korji land without much effort. If he carries on with priestly duties, he won't miss a meal either.'

Parothi who sat listening to these words was surprised. She had come to know now, by accident, that he got produce from his five korji land. The poor soul became aware of the fact that they were among the very prosperous ones in the village. Moreover, she had heard that her husband had a lot of cash but she didn't know how much. If he was asked, he might say that it was none of the women's business.

Sarasothi noticed that her brother had stopped speaking. 'In that case, Anna, why should we bother about Sheena Mayya's pomp and riches? Can't the boy be taught Vedas at home?'

Sathyabhamé too arrived there. One didn't know what was in her mind. She had thought of so many things. Coming from Padumunnooru, she knew the status of her husband more than Parothi did. But she was even more aware of the respect her father's family commanded. She knew her father Madappa used to say that if Aithala, instead of running around for dakshiné money given in return for his priestly duties, had just stayed on doing nothing, he might have become a Gurikara. She had started pondering ever since she realised that Navarathri padya would arrive and that her son would be sacrificed at the altar of Shankara Aii's matha. On the one hand, she felt that if the boy stayed home, he would be able to do nothing except take the cattle out to graze like his Doddamma. Anyway, she was scared that he would move right away from her. For all these reasons, she came there and joined the discussion. The pride inside prompted her. 'These people should not decide by themselves. The mother of the boy should also have a say,' she thought. So, she said, 'There is no hurry. Lachcha's grandfather could also give advice. He won't suggest anything against our welfare.'

Whenever Sathya brought her father into a discussion, Sarasothi would conclude that Sathya had no confidence in their household. 'All right, you may ask him. Maybe his grandfather will have to show the way to his future.' she said, and went away.

The conference broke up then and there, but husband and wife discussed the matter at bedtime. 'It would be good if our son becomes a lawyer. A tahsildara or an officer in the revenue department or any government servant – even that will be enough. Will the prestige of such a job ever be attached to this priesthood?' Aithala disclosed his desire. So it was decided that there would be neither the matha nor the study of Vedas. It was as good as deciding in favour of a government

school. In Padumunnooru, there was one very near the boy's grandfather's house. He would keep Lachcha with him. If he stayed on here at home, he might turn out to be fit for nothing. Sathya made her fears obvious.

Well, the force of wind and rain lessened. Fishing boats went into the sea. Aithala's household bathed in the sea on Mahalaya Amavasyé. As days rolled by, Shankara teacher kept coming, hoping for an increase of a measure of rice in his income. He kept insisting that the boy be sent on Vijayadashami day. Sarasothi had stopped talking to him altogether. 'What? Is Aithala sending his son to Karkada school? Up till now, it was only the Gurikara children who went to school. Now even the Vaidikas are following them,' he started deriding them, sitting in their house. 'Aiigalé, what do we know about all that? It is all up to the parents,' Sarasothi said, cutting him short.

Aithala visited his father-in-law during Navarathri itself. Madappayya welcomed him fondly and teased him. 'Aithalaré, has the father-in-law's house grown stale? After Subbi was born, Sathya didn't come over here, nor did you.' 'I am here to ask for advice from the boys' grandfather. Sathya says it is better if he is put in school.' said Aithala. His father-in-law smiled. 'Ha! At last Aithala's eyes are open. I thought he might send the boy for Vedic instruction. It is the parents' wish. Once a girl is given away, the decision is that of the family she enters,' he said, laughing yet again. 'What else? These days, the respect that people who know a few words of English get will never be acquired by those who have learnt Ashtottara and the Vedas.'

So, conversation went on and a decision was made as well. Madappayya said, 'Let Lachcha stay in his grandfather's house. My son has grown up anyway. He has now got a temporary job of keeping accounts in a village. Lachcha's grandmother thinks that it will be good to have a child at home to keep away boredom. Let him study till the fifth class. The school is not even a mile away. If he stays in Kodi itself, he will have to cross the river everyday to go to school. Small

children shouldn't be sent across the water like that.' Aithala's joy was indescribable. 'It would be good if Lachcha learnt some English. He shouldn't be stamping on mud and slush day and night,' he said.

'That's why I said so. My son thought he was too clever and stopped going to school halfway. If he hadn't, he would have been a lawyer. Even now, the English he knows is quite enough. The other day, when the Tahsildar came, my son went and talked to him. With his recommendation, the temporary job might perhaps become permanent,' said Madappayya. The great news that his brother-in-law had talked to the Tahshildar in English made Aithala feel he was riding high. 'What? You mean Bhava?' he exclaimed in amazement when he heard it.

'Anyway, it is the right thing to do. However, we have to see what Lachcha would like to do. He is so used to running behind his Doddamma. What will he do at his grandfather's, leaving all that behind? You yourself saw the situation when Sathyabhamé came here for delivering the baby.'

'That's the way children are. They will forget everything in a few days. Hasn't he got his grandmother here?' Madappayya said.

Well, that evening, as Aithala walked home, his joy knew no bounds. He became his son, he became a Tahsildar himself and had the world under his feet, and thus his heart danced with joy. As he crossed the estuary, colourful clouds rolled about in the sky in wave after wave. The tips of the smiling waves of water glittered like sharp blades of swords in the shining sun and disappeared. The river water, full and content, swayed and kissed the sea. Watching all that, Aithala built a palace in the sky and moved on. He wasn't aware of anything until the boatman brought him to the other bank and asked him to get off since he had reached Kodi. He got down with a smile. How quickly the estuary had been crossed! The waves of the sea laughed as well, when he did. Aithala walked home with great zest.

As he neared home, he remembered Sathyabhamé and felt great joy that he was bringing her good news. It made him skip. But alongside grew fear – that of facing his sister. There was always the fear of what might happen if Lachchanna didn't like the decision. He thought that the boy might find it very difficult to stay away from Doddamma. It might become necessary to bring him home in the beginning, on Saturdays and Sundays. As these thoughts were finding words, he reached the entrance of the house. The tank filled with water was a few yards away. The continuous croaking of frogs could be heard from there. Aithala chanted 'Gururdeva Gururvishnu' in tune with the croaking of frogs. His chanting reached the interior of the house. Lachchanna called out 'Appa' from within. Sathyabhamé came along with her son to meet him in the moonlight. She was eager to know her father's decision. Aithala had to answer each question among his *'Om tatsavitarvarenyam.'* Anyhow, she was overjoyed with the news she received which did seem to indicate her victory. She picked up Lachcha and said, 'Lachcha, you will be going to school. You must become an intelligent boy.'

Everyone at home had dinner. Lachchanna asked Doddamma to spread the bed. She got ready everything he needed to go to sleep, and went on to finish her work. Sarasothi and Parothi, realising that the time had come to rest, rolled out their beds near Lachcha as usual and lay down. 'Parothi, did you find out anything? What was the news from Lachcha's grandfather's house?' asked Sarasothi softly. 'How would I know? Let them send the boy to the matha or school. It is all the same. If he goes to school, we will have to dip in water twice,' Parothi replied. Lachchanna who was lying down with eyes shut, said, 'Doddamma, Amma said that I will become a clever boy when I go to school. Is that true, Doddamma? Where is school?' 'Rascal, haven't you slept at all?' said Doddamma.

Well, they had got the information they wanted. They kept quiet thinking they shouldn't discuss the matter before the child. They intended to discuss it after he slept but they dropped off to sleep.

Four days of Navarathri passed and the fifth day arrived. Shankara Aii, the teacher, came home yet again looking for Aithala. He intended to catch Aithala before he bathed and left for his work. He met Aithala, fervently hoping that there would be a way to earn a measure of rice. 'Aithalaré, on Vijayadashami day, your Lakshminarayana will arrive at the matha, won't he?' he asked. There was no way Aithala could put off the matter any longer. 'I am happy you have come, Shankara Aiigale. But you see, I cannot go ahead in this matter without the boy's grandfather's advice. So, just so that I could give you a firm answer, I went there. My father-in-law says that our boy must go to Padumunnooru. My wife also likes the idea.'

'Is there a good matha there?'

'There is a good government school nearby. His grandfather wishes that he should go there and learn a little English.'

'Ha, the craze for English didn't spare you either, Aithalaré! It doesn't matter even if you let him study at home. But you shouldn't send him to a government school where children of all castes are sent. A boy of any blighted caste can get in there, remember. Look at our Karkada school for instance. I believe a new teacher has come to teach – a supervisor of labourers, or a weaver. To think that brahmin children should get the taste of his cane! What has this age come to!'

Sarasothi stood listening to the conversation from a distance. She didn't go near. She didn't want to either.

'His grandfather wouldn't ask him to be sent there without finding out all these things. The teacher there may be a brahmin. I gave up the local school because the teacher is from a different caste. Moreover, I believe that brahmin boys sit on a separate bench in that school. In those schools, children do not sit on the floor as they do in your matha.'

'Aithalaré, that's right. Don't I know how to put in a threshing cot as they do in that school? Is it a play of Dasha

Avatara for one to sit on a cot and watch? Leave that be. It is surprising that you have not thought about your future. Don't think that I am talking to you for my own profit.'

'Shankara Aiigalé our Sathyabhamé is just twenty-two. If Narasimha Devaru gives his blessing, she may give birth to another boy. It will be enough if he takes on my duties after me. Won't he master everything after three years of learning by rote?'

'So, is this just to show off Lakshminarayana as a lawyer?'

'Whatever God wills. It's enough if the Gurikaras don't think of him as a brahmin who officiates at death anniversaries.' Not wanting to continue the argument, Aithala went away on the pretext of having to attend to something.

Shankara teacher was disappointed and turned away from the house. When he met Sarasothi face to face, he said. 'You heard your brother's plans! If even Vaidikas give up their caste for the sake of English...'

'What do I know of such things? They do whatever they think is right.' she said indifferently and walked away. Shankara teacher went home with the utmost disappointment. 'I have to learn to bring over a few threshing cots, and what's more, mix up every caste together. Shettys, Bhattas, whoever! Maybe I should make a mixed cattle pound and set the children to graze?' Expressing his disappointment, he took the way home. When Narayana teacher was alive, there was a shed full of children, but he himself found it impossible to hang on to even six children. He had trusted brahmins but had been cheated. If he had taught the Mogera in the area, he could have collected ten or twenty measures of rice. He walked on feeling sad.

Navarathri was over. Aithala had no special puja to perform for Navarathri. If the worship of books at Moola Nakshatra was over, there would be leisure. But at the beginning of Moola Nakshatra, he sent off Sathyabhamé to Padumunnooru upon her insistence. Since she had described the delicacies prepared in grandfather's house to Lachcha in

attractive words, he set out with her. Before leaving, he went to Doddamma. 'I am going to grandfather's house, Doddamma,' he said. She burst into tears. 'Why do you cry, Doddamma?' he asked with concern. 'It's for nothing, nothing,' came the answer.

'Doddamma, I shall come back soon and bring you laadu and undé,' he said. 'All right child,' she said and broke down uncontrollably as she picked him up and fondled him.

Seeing her pain, Lachchanna said that he wouldn't leave at all and would stay back with her.

Sarasothi and Parothi knew that this decision of the boy would encounter great disapproval. So, they had to cajole him with persuasive words and send him off. 'Appayya, you will bring me back home tomorrow, won't you?' he asked. 'Yes,' said Aithala.

Vijayadashami arrived. Aithala did travel from Kodi to Padumunnooru. Lachcha was bathed early in the morning and Aithala himself started Lachcha on his education in conformity with rituals. He called for the teacher to initiate the boy's learning with a slate and piece of chalk. The grandfather was very happy watching Lachcha scribble on the slate for a long time. The next day Dasappayya master came to take Lachcha to school. 'Let's go for a walk, Lachchanna. A lot of children like you come to our school,' he said, to make him agree to go there. Aithala accompanied them up to the shcool. The benches, the chair and the black- board he saw must have given him the confidence that his son would become a munsiff if he studied there.

After writing 'a aa' for half an hour, Lachchanna said that he had had enough of the school and that he wanted to go back to Doddamma. Aithala tried to persuade him to spend some more time in the school. That turned out to be impossible and he brought the boy back to his grandfather's house. However, Aithala had to get back to Kodi without his son being aware of his departure. Lachcha's night-long weeping was beyond description. He was sad at his father leaving him behind. He felt consoled after his mother said that she would stay there with him. The next day too, he had to travel to

school with Dasappa master. Within a week, Sathyabhamé reached her husband's home as well. The truth that his mother and father had left him in a deceitful manner took strong root in the boy's mind. Going to school, writing 'a aa' remembering Doddamma, and crying on being trapped in a new prison – these went on for days.

One day, Lachchanna ran away from school to look for his father, wandered around in the vast kingdom of sand, lost his way and caused great anxiety to his grandparents. So, Dasappa master had to wander all over, find him and bring him back.

It was not possible for the grandparents to bring him comfort.Eventually, they discovered a new way out. Dasappayya belonged to Moolki. His home was far away and he had to spend his days somewhere or the other. He had arranged for his dinner at a hotel in Udupi and lunched at his student's houses on a weekly basis. When Madappayya asked him to look after his grandson and have both his meals in the house, Dasappayya felt as if he had been provided a father-in-law's place. From that day onwards, he kept praising Lachcha as if it was his profession. 'Madappayyanavaré, no other boy will equal your grandson. Today he learnt going up from fifty to hundred and coming down from hundred.... Today he has learnt the times table by rote perfectly... Today the cart and dog lesson has been learnt as well.' He went on like this everday. Whatever be the reason for this sort of attention, it was true that Lachcha found a loving teacher. Dasappa master who would break a cane to bits on other children, was very kind where Lachcha was concerned.

When Lachcha came home, his grandmother fussed over him no end. Anyway, at the end of three months, Lachcha's old dreams disappeared in the new atmosphere. As a result of the delicacies at his grandfather's house, he forgot the affection he received from Doddamma and Lachcha started becoming his grandmother's grandson. When Aithala came to his father-in-law's house twice or thrice, he would ask Lachcha if he wanted to come home for a few days. The boy used to say that he wished to be in the company of his friends. He refused to go with his father.

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The fact that Lachcha had left Kodi and was studying in Padumunnooru was a target for quite a lot of ridicule in the village. Shankara master spewed all his venom before people. In addition, he spread propaganda with Sheena Mayya's support. 'It only remains for Aithala to give up his profession as a priest. A girl from the Shivalli caste has been brought into the family and the son has been sent to a school where he will lose his caste.' Sarasothi didn't at all like the type of education such a school would offer. But she didn't concern herself with it at all, because how a child was to be educated was entirely up to the parents.

Amidst all this, Lachcha continued his primary education. For two or three months in the beginning, he was like a fish out of water. But gradually, with the love of his grandparents, Dasappa master's flattery, and the greater freedom he was given compared to others, he accepted Padumunnooru as his home. He used to go to his village during the holidays. A great deal of love and attention would be given to the son whose visits these days were infrequent. Once in a while, Doddamma's affection tempted him to stay back. But when the holidays were over and school started, he would remember his friends. He would, on his own, ask his father to take him back to his grandparents. Within four of five years, he had learnt everything he needed at the Padumunnooru school. Now he had come home for the holidays. Aithala had started thinking hard about his son's future. After having done all this, what was to be done with the boy? Messages would come from the grandfather's house that the child should not be made to carry mud. If there was any problem, he would look after his study in high school. It was the time when English schools started in Kundapura, Udupi and Mangalore, attracting prosperous people. It was an era when everyone longed to put their children into these schools with the fond hope of making them lawyers or tax collectors.

Aithala was very afraid and deeply troubled. Lachcha was ten years old. There was the matter of celebrating his Upanayana. His sister Subbi was in her eighth year. Sathyabhamé would not oblige with a third child as the horoscope had indicated. That prompted Sarasothi to say, 'Anna, Lachcha has studied enough. Don't dance to the tune of the Padumunnooru people who have ideas of English- learning and such like. Can you give up the profession of your family? What happens to those who rely on you to perform priestly duties? If they have to conduct a death ceremony or a wedding, who should attend to them?' When she scolded him like this, Sathyabhamé had no answer. The family profession of priesthood shouldn't end with Aithala. What would happen next? That was the year when Gurikara Sheena Mayya was invited to the wedding at Kokkarané and Aithala was insulted because he didn't even come to hear of it. This incident pierced his heart and made him think that there was no dignity in his profession. Although people said, 'Aithalaré, Aithalaré,' in front of him, they insulted him behind his back, calling him a 'dakshiné brahmana,' a brahmin living on others' largesse. Sheena Mayya's taunts and Shankara teacher's spicy tales were increasing, and those were the days when he was longing to show off his riches before them.

Aithala had no answer to his sister's cross-questioning. On the other hand, he said, 'What on earth is all this chatter for? No plans will be made till his Upanayana is performed. Things are looking auspicious this year. God willing, we can do it when he comes for holidays.' His idea had support from everyone in the household. They decided to perform it on a grand scale, for he was the only son. As soon as Vaishakha arrived, preparations began for Lachcha's Upanayana. The same kind of pandal as was put up for Aithala's wedding covered the yard. This time, Aithala didn't call Sheena Mayya for help. Instead, he asked Subraya Upadhyaya, one among those who disliked Sheena Mayya, to supervise the cooking. Aithala personally invited everyone. Going to Sheena Mayya's house, he insisted on their coming as if they were closely related. Madappayya's whole family decided to come over from Padumunnooru and stay for a few days. Not having anyone

else to pour his love on after his son had grown up, Madappayya considered his grandson the apple of his eye. That was why he had decided to stay in Kodi for a few days, though he generally never left his own house. Amidst all this, there was no describing the joy of the boy himself. Doddamma, grandfather, mother – everyone fussed over him. The Upanayana went off with great rejoicing all around. A man had come from Udupi to supervise the whole ceremony, on the insistence of the Padumunnooru folk. Since the courts were in recess, lawyer Nagappayya, a close friend of Aithala, had also arrived. For lunch on the day of the Upanayana, there were ambodé and holigé along with two varieties of snacks. Sarasothi had insisted that people be offered more helpings over and over again. She had not forgotten the hurried lunch supervised by Sheena Mayya during Aithala's wedding.

The guests this time lacked nothing. Subraya Upadhyaya was not any less eager than Sheena Mayya where extending hospitality was concerned. So, he showered great care on the lawyer and supervisor. Though Sheena Mayya sat among the Gurikaras, wearing three gold rings and a thick string round his waist, Subraya didn't pay any personal attention to him. So what? Aithala himself came over many times. 'Mayyaré, is everything all right? Please consider this your own house,' he said. Madappayya also talked to him freely, remembering him from the past. But Sheena Mayya was a little disgruntled since he couldn't see his peer, Vasudeva Gurikara, among the guests. Eventually, he couldn't help asking the Gurikara himself. The Gurikara said that it might be because Aithala had not been invited to their Kokkarané wedding. Moreover, even if he had been invited, would he go for lunch hosted by such a miserly man?

The Upanayana was over. The supervisor and the lawyer from Kundapura left within a couple of days. Madappayya would also leave. 'Please decide what Lachcha should do next before you go,' Sathyabhamé said to her father. 'Should I be saying anything at all about it? I have already said everything. You should listen to what Dasappayya master has to say about

Lachcha. He says that no one as clever as he has ever finished his schooling there. Should all that intellect be limited to merely performing Shanthi and Homa? In these days, no other profession commands the dignity of a lawyer or a tahsildar. If he learns English, in ten years he will have at least four large measures of land as his own to cultivate. He won't gain any respect if he takes up the profession of a priest.'

Sarasothi couldn't stay quiet after this. 'You may speak of respect. But who will carry on priestly duties after Anna?' 'What is the loss if he doesn't continue them? Isn't there anyone else in the village to continue them?' he replied. Aithala said, 'My horoscope says that I will have three sons. Won't more children be born in this house?'

'That's right. Not three. There may be three hundred. You seem to have forgotten that you are fifty-five. Anyway, what is it to me? Won't this English-learning and the rest of it cost heaps and heaps of money?'

'If one heap is spent now, four heaps will be made the day after. It is like casting a fishing line. If you are afraid to do it, there will be no fish,' Aithala said.

'Sarasothamma, don't worry about money. I can spend any amount of money for my grandson. I am not happy that my own son left school after learning a little English. If this boy at least finishes his English education, he will bring honour to both our houses. Do you know what respect the supervisor who had come to the Upanayana commands wherever he goes?'

'Why, our lawyer from Kundapura, who came to Kota during holidays, has not gone back yet. He is feted wherever he goes. There's no one who has not invited him home for a meal.'

'When all men get together and long for Lachcha's future glory, why should I, a mere woman, bother? I knew his future would take different path when you sent him to a government school. What is it to me if you want him to learn English?' said Sarasothi. Madappayya left after the functions.

Sarasothi called her brother again. 'Anna, he is going to study further. Let him. But don't let him be in his grandfather's debt. They will definitely spend the money, I know. But it is not good for you to look to them for financing your son's education. It doesn't matter even if we eat once a day. Let him continue his studies with your money. Tomorrow, some one like Sheena Mayya will ridicule you saying you had to beg to make your son learn English.' Aithala found a lot of sense in what she said. 'Sarasothi, what are you thinking? I am not leaving my son in his debt just because he said so. That's why I have now decided to send him to Kundapura.'

'What will you do for money?'

'What are you saying? I have at least five or six thousand rupees with me now,' he said with a swagger. Sarasothi was highly satisfied and kept quiet. That was the first time she had heard from her brother about his having so much money. Since he had himself said that he had five or six thousand, she was certain that he possessed half that, at the very least. In truth, though no one knew where and how, Aithala had twice as much money as he said he had.

Lachchanna's summer vacation was over soon. After that there were preparations for his English education. His joy was beyond description. He walked along the beach, visited neighbours and proudly informed them about it. Once he went to Sheena Mayya's house as well. His fifth son and Lachcha were of the same age. His Upanayana had also been celebrated that year. So, whenever he was free, he accompanied the boy and played among the honné trees on the beach. In between, they competed with each other in Japa, Sandhyavandané, Agnikarya and reciting Vedic verses which they had learnt. That boy went to Shankara teacher's matha. His name was Orata. His rough character matched the sense the name carried. Competing with him was Lachchanna who had grown up thoroughly pampered by his grandmother. In the matha, one had mathematical tables at one's fingertips. Hence, Lachchanna was never ahead of Orata in such contests.

One day, as usual, contests went on between them in games and such other areas. Lachchanna, who wanted to show off and get even, boasted that he would go to Udupi or Kundapura to study English. Orata wanted to go one better, and said that he would go to Bangalore with his brother when he came down. They had both heard people at home bragging and were well-equipped to do it. To be ahead, they used words their elders employed.

'English cannot be spoken by the children of priests,' said Orata. 'Who said so?' asked Lachcha.

'Appayya says so. English is not as easy as chanting vedic verses. There was someone who wanted to be a lawyer and so started learning English. He tried and failed over ten times and has now come back and started farming.'

'It must be someone who went to the matha. That's why one should go to a government school.'

'Those who go to government schools have no caste. Our teacher says that all sorts of low caste children gather together there.'

'Ho! As if you come from a great caste – washing up dishes in which all and sundry have eaten!'

Words were exchanged thus, and eventually, it led to a fight. They swore that they would never talk to each other again. That evening, they played, each on his own, for a long time, gathering unripe fruits of honné. Then they saw a boat sailing far away in the sea. Looking at the steam rising from it, Lachcha called out, 'Hey, Orata, look at the steam boat! It seems it's coming from foreign countries.'

Orata was attracted by it and went running with him to the beach. 'It is from Bombayi, I hear,' he said, and talked about the ships he saw at least once a month. 'In the dark you can only see the lights of the boat.' When they parted in the evening, they were friends again. Lachcha told Orata that he might go back to Padumunnooru the next morning. In return, Orata said that his brother might come to take him to Bangalore soon. Now, they were two friends saying farewell to each other.

A couple of days after that, Lachcha went back to Padumunnooru. There his grandfather would decide the details of his further education after talking to the knowledgeable Dasappa master. That day, elders gathered and there was a big meeting. Dasappa master said that Udupi was the most suitable place for education. 'He can come home everyday. Lunch will be taken care of at the matha. There is less expense. There will be no need to stay at some hotel or the other,' he counselled. Madappayya said that he had nothing more to say after the master had spoken, and gave his seal of approval. Rama Aithala agreed to it and came back home.

The one thing that bothered him was Sarasothi. He was scared of what she would say about the boy staying at his grandfather's all the time. However, he was quite happy about expenditure being cut because of the arrangement. He came home in the evening. 'Ask anyone in Padumunnooru. They all say that Udupi is good for learning. It seems Kundapura is very expensive.' 'It doesn't matter to us where he goes.' said Sathyabhamé. Sarasothi frowned and went away. The next day she called her brother. 'Anna, it is not good to bring up children under someone else's obligation. You have only one son. Tomorrow, only the memory of his grandfather's house will remain in his mind, not of yours.' Aithala was greatly disturbed. He didn't dare say that his sister's words were worthless. Once in a while, as he thought about it, he did get the suspicion that his son perhaps was moving away from him. But he neither had the courage nor the desire to say no to what the father-in-law in Padumunnooru had suggested. It was but natural that Sathyabhamé's affection always flowed towards Padumunnooru. 'I don't say he shouldn't be in Kundapura. But who will look after him if he falls sick? Here, he will come home to his grandfather's every day. It will be only in the afternoon that he won't be there,' Sathyabhamé said when her opinion was sought. Using the same line of argument, Aithala had to win Sarasothi over gently. 'He will have to eat all sorts of food in the hotels in Kundapura. Who will look after him if he falls sick? Won't he have to be brought here? Instead, wouldn't Udupi be better

until he can look after himself? Shouldn't his hair be oiled and combed everyday? Shouldn't someone bathe him everyday? Shouldn't he have an oil bath once a week? Is all that possible if he stays in a hotel? The child is only ten years old. Is he able to wash himself and have an oil bath? If we send him to a hotel, we shall always be worried about him,' he said. These were heartfelt words with which she couldn't disagree. 'That's right. Let it be. It is only proper that there is someone to look after the child.' But, deep inside, she could not help thinking that putting the boy in a government school was the initial mistake.

Now, there was no room for arguments about matters regarding Lachcha. It was decided that it would be better for him to stay in Padumunnooru and go to Udupi everyday. When school started, they put him in a high school where he would study in English. Dasappayya master went along with Lachcha on the first day. It wasn't as if Lachcha hadn't seen Udupi. Even when he was in the lower school, he used to go to Udupi for Paryaya, Lakshadeepa and other festivities. After watching them in the temples, he was always eager to go there. There was great joy in him when it became possible for him to be there everyday. He would bathe in the morning and pick up a book if he felt like it. Then the routine of morning meals. After that, with a bag on his back, he would start off to school. The four-mile journey between school and home did make him tired, though not bored, in the beginning.

But he would join some friend or the other along the way. He would then reach school and classes would start. During lunch in the afternoon, he would have lunch at a hotel chosen by his elders and go back to school which would finish at five o' clock. Then he would reach home playing all along the way. What did he have to bother about with his grandmother waiting at the door for the tired grandson? She always kept snacks ready to satisfy his hunger.

As days and months passed, the new life appealed to him a great deal. Smartness and fluency were seen in him as well. There grew a pride in him about learning English. When villagers came along, he would talk with his friends in

English in a determined manner. When he went to Kodi once in three months, he would be itching to speak in English before his father and Doddamma. Could Rama Aithala's joy be described? He felt assured that his son would become a lawyer in four years. He was determined to make sure somehow that Lachcha would talk to Orata in English. But when he came down, Orata had gone away to Bangalore.

As the years passed, Lachcha became less eager to come home for the holidays. The desire to wander around Udupi even when there was no school became stronger. If anyone asked him what he would do there, he showed them big books. 'It's not like before. There is a lot to read,' he would say. Sarasothi didn't like the idea of his spending time in Padumunnooru and Udupi and not coming home during vacation. She would often tell Rama, 'See, he doesn't like our place at all. Otherwise, shouldn't he be longing to come home?' But Aithala would argue on the boy's behalf. 'Perhaps he needs to study.' But Sarasothi did not accept that argument. 'He doesn't like the food here. Maybe they are looking after him very well at his grandfather's place. Let it be. What does it matter to me?' Aithala's reply would be to ask her not to make things up. To prove her point, she felt it necessary to bring it up again during lunch. 'What's wrong with the curry made today? Garigé and undalakku were specially made for him. You ate a bit but he never even touched them. Why? We don't know how to make things for him to eat as they do at his grandfather's place.' On that day, Sathyabhamé herself had ground coconut and rice with great effort and made the dishes for her son. She was also upset with him for having been content with just smelling them. For that one day, she joined the others in scolding him. Well... could Lachcha tolerate all this in his father's presence? His eyes reddened then and there. The sea itself overflowed from his eyes. He stopped eating midway and walked out. Rama Aithala was angry. 'You are so small but if your people tell you a few things, your pride is hurt,' he said. However, Lachcha didn't eat anymore. Neither did he show any interest in the snacks made for him.

Somehow or the other, he spent two or three days at home. Eventually, he left, saying that he had a lot to study and so would go back to his grandfather's. From then on, he was quite indifferent towards coming to his father's house for his holidays.

Five years passed in this manner and Lachcha was now studying in the third form. Aithala had come to the Udupi market once. He found out where the school was and arrived there. He had come only to look at his son to his heart's content. 'Did you feel like seeing your mother at all? You recently had holidays for a week,' he said. 'If there was a vacation, there was an examination as well, soon after,' Lachchca replied. 'Never mind. How long is it before your summer holidays?' 'Two more weeks,' the boy said. 'You must come home for the holidays without fail,' Aithala said. 'Yes,' Lachcha answered with some indifference. 'God willing, your sister's wedding should take place,' Aithala told him before he left.

Summer holidays arrived. There was no escape for Lachcha from visiting his parents. Moreover, Aithala had told his father-in-law to send him home as soon as the holidays started. 'He doesn't even seem to remember it at all.' Harsh words, really, but the desire to see his son was growing very strong. He was nearly fifty-five. His hair had turned white and he wasn't as strong as before. Subbi was about twelve. Her wedding was already delayed. One could not afford to wait any longer to get her married. Subbi had grown up quite happily, much loved by them all. So, though Lachcha was far away, it didn't seem to be unbearable. Aithala's hope of having a third child, which his horoscope had predicted, had proved futile. Consequently, there was no one to carry on his profession. Under such circumstances, the fact that Lachcha lived at a distance didn't give him any comfort.

Lachcha! Though a week had passed since the holidays began, he showed no inclination to go home. Though he was told over and over again, he was not willing to give up going to Udupi everyday and wandering around with friends of his own age, for the sake being a recluse in Kodi.

Aithala would wait for his son everyday and feel disappointed. He had no time to spare. The search for a bridegroom for his daughter had to go on. 'Subbi has grown like a buffalo, an elephant,' said people around them. 'Maybe English Aithala will get her married when she matures.' Sheena Mayya was the first and foremost among people who talked this way. He had got two of his sons married and acquired renown. He had decided to get the troupe of Nagamma's children for the wedding. Vasudeva Gurikara's command too was the same. But Sheena Mayya was very scared that his eldest son might be angry with him. How could he not be afraid of his son who sent him money every month and made him a well-known prosperous man in the town? Moreover, he had already journeyed to Bangalore once. When he saw his son's grandeur and the hotel business, his feet could scarcely touch the earth. How should Aithala feel now when Sheena Mayya ridiculed him? Someone suggested that his daughter be given to Sheena Mayya's second son in marriage. Sarasothi quickly approved of the idea. 'We will have nothing to do with Sheena Mayya,' said Aithala. Through someone or the other, the remark reached Sheena Mayya's ears. 'Am I a fool to bring a girl from English Aithala's house?' he taunted in return. He had found it a matter of great derision that Aithala's son had been sent for English education. As Subbi grew up, each day began to appear like an era. Sathyabhamé was also hurt by the way her daughter was being ridiculed everyday by people. 'If you ask Appayya, maybe he will find a connection from somewhere,' she told her husband. Sarasothi whispered in her brother's ear. 'The one relationship we brought about is ridiculed by people as half Shivalli or three quarters Shivalli. If we ask Padumunnooru again, they may find someone just like that. What then?' This was not untrue. The criticism that came up after his wedding had hurt Aithala badly. 'What can I do, Sarasothi?' he said, scratching his forehead. 'I have seen a hundred horoscopes. No match is available which goes with our wretched gothra. Moreover, we have people who mock us saying we are Shivalli and half Shivalli. As if it is not enough, everyone is scared of the star under which Subbi was born. They say it is bad for

the boy's parents. A bridegroom without parents, with enough income and horoscopes matching – I can't see anyone like that around.' 'Anna, if you say aloud that you will give gold worth fifty coins, the horoscope will take care of itself. Everyone hesitates because you are known to be tight-fisted. Look, in our own home in Mandarthi itself, there are three boys still unmarried. It is unlikely that our Subbi's horoscope will not match the horoscope of one of them at least,' said Sarasothi.

He approved of her suggestion. There could be progress on the matter if Sathyabhamé agreed. The same night, he brought up the matter with Sathyabhamé. 'It is true that a distance of six miles is rather far. But Mandarthi Venkappayya has three sons and they are all good-looking. They have property which gives them two hundred rupees altogether. There is no dearth of food or anything else. We are not strangers. So they may not say no if we approach them. The children have lost their mother and so we don't have to be anxious about the matter.' 'We are neck-deep in this and so whatever it is to be, is fine. I don't know them. If you say it is fine, that is enough for me. Subbi is worrying about it all the time and getting emaciated listening to what people are saying,' said Sathyabhamé.

The discussion continued the next day with Sarasothi. 'Mandarthi is not a bad place. The only thing is that it is to the east. Pray and find out what God wills. If the prasada sign is in our favour, then we can go and talk to them. There is no need to build a relationship in this place which keeps mocking us every moment,' Parothi said quietly. 'Yes, Akka. I agree with you,' said Sathyabhamé.

Aithala said the day was not auspicious for travel and put off the job till the day after. The next morning, he woke up, had his bath and prayed before God. Sathyabhamé had bathed and stood, hands folded, next to him. Subbi also joined them in prayer. Aithala did aarathi, prayed to God to save his honour and grant him prasada. When the flower fell to the right, 'It's fine!' he yelled in joy. Sarasothi's happiness was indescribable that day. So was Aithala's enthusiasm.

'I will bring the horoscope today itself,' he said and commanded that the cooking get done quickly. It was, and lunch was served. He looked at the almanac and let the inauspicious hours lapse. He tied the ancient green wrap round his waist and started off in search of a bridegroom. In the hot sun, immersed in thought, he walked towards Barakooru. He reached the Mandarthi relatives by evening. Venkappayya met him at the portal itself. All along the way there, Aithala had seen good omens. Venkappayya fussed over Aithala a great deal. He asked if Sarasothi was well. She had been married to his brother who had died within two years of the marriage. His hopes had been dashed. For two or three years, Sarasothi kept visiting Mandarthi. However, Venkappayya never forgot her. His affection for her was great.

He was around sixty years old at that time. He wasn't married twice but thrice. He had two daughters by the second marriage and three sons by the third. The eldest was twenty, the next was a year younger, and the third, a year younger than that. Venkappayya asked about Sarasothi's welfare. Aithala told him that he had come here because she remembered the place. 'She hasn't been here for the last three or four years. Why can't she come over, once?' Venkappayya asked with concern. Aithala too was included in the concern he showed. After dinner, he told Venkappayya the reason for his visit. 'Aithalaré, I am also getting on in years. I can't move around as I used to. The eldest hasn't got married yet. I want him to marry. I have not gone around asking for horoscopes. I believe something will turn up and if something is fated to happen, it will happen,' said Venkappayya, providing a preface.

So, he brought the horoscopes of two of his children. Aithala looked at them, thought for long and said, 'The first one is fairly good but the second one is very favourable. It will be whatever you say.' 'Whatever it might be, it isn't good to think of the marriage of the second one while the first one is still unmarried,' Venkappayya spoke his mind.

Well, either boy was all right for Aithala. 'The main thing is that some good fortune seems to be determined to

bring our households together,' Aithala said. Their decision was made that night. They both decided that the wedding would take place that summer. The next day Aithala reached home 'with the speed of wind,' as characters in a bayalata folk play say. There was great joy in his house that day. Sarasothi called Subbi. 'It is a house as good as gold. Staying here and going there are just the same. It doesn't seem like a mother-in-law's house at all,' she said. Sathyabhamé was very satisfied.

Aithala decided on the day of the wedding but kept it to himself in order to prevent Sheena Mayya or Shankara teacher from playing mischief.

While burning with enthusiasm, that very same night, Atala started burning with fever. The fever was quite serious. Aithala was not a man for suffering as he was for talking or wandering around. Even if he felt slightly warm, he would say his whole body was aflame. Soon, there was no describing the uproar he created the whole night because of fever. In between, he remembered Lachcha. 'Even though his holidays have started, does he have the desire to see us at all? Abba, the children of today!' he shouted. The anguish boiled over. So, Sarasothi sent Soora to Padumunnooru. Before evening the next day, His Highness Lachcha arrived home looking crestfallen. As soon as he went beside Aithala, he was asked when his holidays had started. 'One week ago,' answered Lachcha.

'You couldn't come here even after a week? Why did you come now? You could as well have come after I had died!,' said Aithala, humiliating Lachcha who had never been spoken to like that before. All his pride subsided at once. Like a calf, he went into a corner, crying. He didn't eat that night and all the efforts made by Sarasothi and Parothi were in vain.

Aithala got out of bed the next day. He was wondering whether he got the fever because of the water in the east or the water he drank during the journey in the hot sun. The fever had left him, though a little weakness remained. He began wandering around again. 'Where is the boy?' he asked and Lachcha stood before him crestfallen.

'Children should not forget those who gave them birth,' Aithala started on the second chapter of his preaching. Sarasothi said : 'Just because he stayed back because his friends are there, why should you get angry with him? After listening to your scolding, the boy didn't eat his food last night.'

'He has become swollen-headed because of your pampering him all the time. I am getting on in years. If he does not have the sense to stay with me for a while and talk to me, what is the use of his being around?'

His Highness Lachcha cried copious tears yet again. Parothi had to come in to say that there was no need to carry on scolding the boy.

Anyhow, the incident was over. Aithala recovered from fever. He called his confidante Subraya Upadhyaya and started preparations for the wedding. Pandal, market, gold – he wandered all over without a moment' s respite. Sathyabhamé went to her father's place one day. 'Isn't Mandarthi a place known for fever?' Madappayya asked. 'What is fated to happen will happen,' Aithala philosophically repeated what he had often said before.

Lachcha was a litle bolder now that the wedding commotion had started and Aithala was occupied in moving around. He would lower his head and move away whenever Aithala arrived. Once in a while, he felt like going back to Padumunnooru. But, what could he do, with his sister's wedding ahead?

Once, Aithala said, 'Lachcha, come with me. You will see the market in Kundapura as well. What do you gain by sitting at home piously holding your nose?' Not having the courage to say no, he followed his father and reached Kundapura, after having walked barefoot all day under the sun. He walked around in the market like an idiot and came back home. But it took three days of nursing before the ache in his legs would subside. So, he had to just sit around like a guest during his sister's wedding.

What else could he do if Aithala commented how foolish children who learn English become? On the other hand, if Lachcha volunteered to help in household duties, it was only to realise that he didn't know how to do things. 'Lachcha, why don't you make happala at least? Nearly four thousand need to be made. Nobody is sitting idle,' his mother told him. Unable to stand it any more, Lachcha sat down to do it. Then the dough got stuck to the board and others had the problem of removing it all.

Lachcha felt that it would be better for him to reach Padumunnooru as soon as possible. He couldn't spend time at home. He had to spend it alone, utterly bored, in the honné grove where Sheena Mayya's son Orata and he had played together when young. There, in Padumunnooru, was the beach. One could play around gathering colourful shells. If that too got boring, one could dig tunnels in the sand, or sit looking westward as if counting waves. 'Why am I being faced with a test, all of a sudden? I have never had this experience before.' He was in deep anguish. He saw everyone in the house working like a servant and his father, like a coolie, just to save money. Rama Aithala wanted love from his son. Instead, even before thinking of returning love, contempt towards all at home took root in Lachcha's mind.

He remembered his father carrying a head-load of pepper from the ghats on the way back from the market, and his following him like a fool. Didn't his father have two annas to hire a cart? he thought with disdain. As one thought after another rolled over in his mind, his fingers held a stick and drew lines haphazardly on the sand. When these meaningless symbols were washed away by each and every wave from the sea, he would begin scribbling all over again. Eventually, he could no longer see the lines he had drawn. 'Oh, the sun has set. It's time to reach the prison,' he would say to himself and start walking back.

Anyway, it wouldn't be untrue to say that he was counting every minute while waiting for the days of the wedding.

~13~

Subbi's wedding day approached. Madappayya came down a week before. Though he too had scrutinised a few horoscopes for his granddaughter, he was quite happy with this alliance. It appeared that their ancestors were distant relatives of these people. Anyway, he personally helped to see that everything went well. Aithala's load was lessened as well. But his new man in charge, Subraya Upadhyaya, was not all that content. Anyhow, the four-day wedding went off grandly. Sarasothi was very happy that Subbi had joined the same family as herself.

It was difficult to discover Lachcha's whereabouts during the wedding. Though his father and grandfather were very proud that he was learning English, and God willing, he might get his B.A. degree and become a tax collector, there was no way that Lachcha would come near them when called. Even if he did, he was like the dumb Goddess Mookambika. Frustrated, Aithala would ask of what use his English was if he could not speak in English with the guests. After that, Lachcha would disappear from the pandal and wander around. His favourite spot was by the honné trees at the back. Otherwise, there was the beach. There was no dearth of jobs to be done at the wedding. Aithala was getting fed up depending on others. 'What sort of English is this? Can't he stay at home to offer a pot of water to those who come? Whose house is this?' If he saw Lachcha and asked him to bring betel leaves or water, he would bring the former with no arecanuts or lime, and water without jaggery. Thus, Rama Aithala decided that children who learnt English were of no use at home.

The wedding was over and the guests left. Pressured by his father, Lachcha went right up to the bridegroom's house with the wedding party. Even there, he didn't mingle with other children. He didn't seem to have any desire for the company of elders, either. After the pandal was taken down and everything was over, Aithala voiced his great concern about Lachcha to his father-in-law.

'Why are you worried about him? Is he not well?'

'There's nothing wrong with him. He eats very well if he is served a good meal. But I never imagined he would be so dull. He seems to be able to do nothing. He doesn't even understand what he is told. What's the use if such people learn English?'

'Have you come to this decision on the basis of what you have seen of him here? Ask my wife. No one can talk like him. He is so smart, so clever. He must be feeling gloomy here because he hasn't been spending long periods of time here.'

Meanwhile, Subraya Upadhyaya turned up there. There was a bundle of faded sheets of paper in his hand. 'Aithalaré you performed the wedding grandly. If that accursed Sheena's wedding party hadn't begun that very day, there would have been twice the number of people here.'

'Set any news of him on fire. Why did he have his son's wedding on the same days as our Subbi's? There were many other auspicious days. In addition, he is proud that the girl is from Vasudeva Gurikara's family. Quite a few who were expected here didn't come because of him. Wasn't food for at least a hundred people thrown away everyday? Never mind, the labourers were lucky. At least on all four days the whole crowd had a continuous supply of good food which they wouldn't have seen anywhere else.'

'Leave that be. Where is your Lachcha? Doesn't seem to be around.' 'He? Might have lodged himself somewhere on a honné tree. I was talking about him with Mava. I never thought that the boy would turn out to be such a worthless fellow.'

'Who? Lachcha worthless? What are you saying?'

Madappayya gathered strength, spat out the tobacco juice outside the yard and came back. 'Subrayaré, Rama Aithala is worried that Lachcha is not interested in anything when he comes here.'

'That's how it is. We don't know the true colours of those who appear meek. Do you know why I came here looking for Lachcha? It's for this.' Subraya took out the bundle, placed it in front of them and swept off the cobwebs and dust from it. 'I came to get him to read some of these records.'

'Yes, that is the one excitement which we lacked – reading records! Who knows how old that English may be? How can this shy doll read it?'

'Subrayaré, what's that record?' asked Madappayya.

'You see, one of the records, it is believed, mentions that the fields to the east of our house are to be used for meeting the expenses on God. Now, Sheena Mayya has encroached on them. The other day, I showed some records to your grandson. He read them all very well and told me what they meant. If he reads this, I may get some supportive evidence, that's why I brought it here.'

'Will he be able to read it and explain it to you? It is too much for a third form boy. Why, our Dasappa master knows a lot of English. But even he cannot read a record.'

Aithala said in disbelief : 'All right. Go and look for your lawyer. Our Soora says that he sits day and night either among the honné trees or on the beach. The summer sun must be quite cool. Even at this moment, he must be sitting somewhere there. There's no place in the house, you see.'

'In that case, I shall go and see him. I tell you, Rama Aithala, your Lachcha will be a good lawyer. Now when I see his competence, I wish I had sent my son to learn English instead of sending him to cook somewhere in order to be able to eat. But, where is the money for it?' he said and walked away towards the sea on his mission.

Rama Aithala sat worrying about his son for a long time. 'Sheena Mayya's children have brought a good name to their father by running a hotel at least. Who knows what Lachcha will do?' 'How old is the boy after all? You might have scolded him for something. That's why he is scared,' said his father-in-law. Subraya returned within an hour. Even before he

opened the gate and crossed the yard to come into the house, he started speaking. 'Aithalaré, what did I say? Your boy is no ordinary boy. He is much better than the lawyer from Kundapura.' His delight was beyond description.

The new experience of having obtained information about his field gave him ten times more joy than the joy about Lachcha's education. 'See, Madappayya, the copy of the judgement is old and faded, true. But it seems it is on our side. In the litigation between Parampathi Gurikara and us, this was the judgement given by the Mangalore court. It says that the field by the side of our canal belongs to God. Your Lachcha said field means gaddé. I shall go to Kundapura tomorrow itself, show this to the lawyer and register a notice against Sheena.'

Madappayya took the record. Rama Aithala came there as well. But would the faded records containing the judgement speak to them? Subraya showed them the record and said, 'Madappayya, your grandson is very intelligent,' and left.

Rama Aithala found it difficult to believe what Subraya had said. He decided that day to find out what his boy was worth.

Lachcha had just finished his supper and was lying down. When Aithala called him, Lachcha pretended to be asleep. Eventually, Madappayya had to go and bring him over. He placed some court records in front of the boy. He knew what they contained. 'What is in here? It is a copy of the decree given in the Nagaiah Shetty litigation.' Lachcha murmured 'gusu-gusu' in English, turned the paper over and gave an approximate summary. Aithala was satisfied. 'That's good. It is enough if you are good at this task. You don't need to till the field. It is enough if your learn English well,' he said, patting his son's back. 'This is how children should be. At fifteen, you should be smart in every way,' said his grandfather and sent him back.

Even after Lachcha went back to bed, they continued talking about him. He could hear what the elders were saying. 'Let the boy's high school study go on in Kundapura. The

weather is good. Moreover, I can see him often. I have heard that horse carriages ply from Udupi to Kundapura,' Aithala said. 'Small children should not be left on their own in distant places,' Madappayya opined. 'Anyway, that school starts in the month of Kaaru. There's still a fortnight left. Let's see.'

The next day, Madappayya went back. He asked for Lachcha to be sent back soon. 'Let him be here for a few more days, Appayya,' said Sathyabhamé.

Even before Subraya Upadhyaya left for Kundapura, he had spread with fanfare the news about the Mangalore court judgement, and with it he gave the endorsement that Aithala's son Lachcha could read English as easily as drinking water. So, all those who had been walking from home to court and back, started to come to Aithala's house. Some came by to find out if Lachcha could read records. Aithala felt extremely proud. Sheena Mayya had it done through someone else. He sent a couple of letters to Lachcha with someone to find out what the records said. Some days later, he himself wanted to show an important record and find out its contents. He thought of a plan.

He saw Lachcha in the honné grove. 'What's this? The gentleman from Padumunnooru doesn't know me at all. Come, let's go home. Everyone in our house who was close to you in years has gone away to Bangalore. You know about Orata's going there, don't you? Now I have sent the younger one, Chandra. I couldn't attend your sister's wedding. We had our son's wedding at the time, so we couldn't come.' He spoke in an enticing manner and took him home and placed delicacies from Bangalore in front of him. Lachcha was tempted. Sheena Mayya's record was read and his desire was fulfilled as well. After that, Lachcha visited them twice of thrice. Rama Aithala got to know of it. He told Lachcha not to visit him often since Sheena Mayya disliked the family. But Lachcha didn't forget the hospitality that he had received.

A week before school started, Lachcha was called home by Madappayya.

He had sent word that Lachcha should come back. The boy got ready to leave.

The household got together. Aithala was very worried. It was his experience that the boy would be lost to him if he went back to his grandfather's. But the cost of study in English would increase in the coming years. He thought that part of it might be borne by his father-in-law if Lachcha stayed in Udupi. Wanting to find out what people at home thought, he asked Sathya what should be done since her father had said that he should go back to Udupi. 'How do I know? But seeing that he doesn't like this house anymore....' she stopped. 'I will tell you what I wish to say,' said Sarasothi. 'He shouldn't be in Udupi at all. Maybe it is better that he doesn't stay there since he appears to be lost in thought all the time. How long can he stay in his grandfather's house?' Aithala said that they could ask him and find out what he wanted to do. Lachcha too knew about Kundapura. He had a couple of classmates from there. So he thought he might live there as well for a year. A little later, he said he didn't mind staying in Udupi either.

Aithala's preference for Kundapura grew stronger. 'If it's tiresome to walk, he can take a jutka, a horse carriage, which will be here tomorrow. If he walks up to Saligrama from here, he can take the jutka to Kundapura from there. It doesn't seem that he will be under our control if he stays in Udupi.' But another worry cropped up. Where could the boy have his meals? Which hotel? People from Koteshwara had hotels there but none from Kota. The very next day, Subraya Upadhyaya arrived. 'What record have you brought today? If there is a judgement from the time of King Nanduraya, who introduced leather coins, to say that all the salt water from the estuary belongs to you, show it to Lachcha,' Aithala teased him.

'Do you think I am obsessed with records? Anyway, I did send a registered notice to Sheena Mayya. That's indeed a favour from Lachcha. I came here to ask about another matter. Our boy, who is a cook with the tahsildar in Kundapura, will be transferred to Karkala, it seems. I have no desire to send him to such places. Moreover, some people advised me that when he can cook, he should open a hotel. There was no place at the moment for people from Kota to stay. Why should we

eat the white rice preparations of the Koteshwara people? How about running a hotel? I shall also be going there because of the litigation. The boy is old enough. Can't it be done?' he asked.

'Why not?' answered Rama Aithala. 'Let him do it if he can cook. Why should our people who go to Kundapura starve there until evening and come back home? But, if the charges are higher than six pavané, no one will come to eat.'

'Wouldn't there be at least a few school children? A measure of rice and eight annas over and above that. Wouldn't that be enough?'

Aithala said, 'Let's see. God willing, we are thinking of keeping Lachcha in Kundapura.'

Rains in the month of Kaaru has started. The day for deciding Lachcha's future arrived as well. Aithala went to Padumunnooru along with him. At the same time, the news that Lachcha had failed that year reached them. Aithala was thunderstruck.

Lachcha was no less disappointed. 'Aithalaré,' grandfather said, 'Anyone can fail. English is not a mere banana to be plucked and swallowed. Don't stop his studies because he has failed. Let him cross the border of Matric at least.' Rama Aithala took his advice. 'In Udupi, his developing mind might have wandered here and there. Kundapura is a small place. There is nowhere to wander and while away time,' Aithala said. Lachchanna too said that he would not go back to the same school in Udupi. His pride could not tolerate the fact that he would have to sit in the same class. It was to be Kundapura. He could continue his studies there. Under no circumstance should he stop his education. Aithala had decided that it would be useful in the future if the boy continued to study.

Well, Lachchanna left to discover another town. Father and son set off, holding umbrellas. The school had opened a week earlier. Admission was granted. Subraya Upadhyaya's hotel for the Kota caste hadn't opened yet. Unwillingly, Aithala

put Lachcha in the hotel run by Narayana Gota of Koteshwara. 'Even if Kota is lost, Gota is found,' joked Lachcha and checked in.

Lachcha, whose spirit was dampened at the beginning of the year, decided to erase the failure from his mind and move on.

The town, friends, and place for meals were all new to Lachcha. His friends were likeable. In the hotel where he stayed, there were quite a few students. At sixteen, he was the youngest. The rest included even twenty- or twenty-five-year-olds. A couple of them were fathers as well. A well-built person among them was his classmate. He had a six- or seven-year-old son at home. They had not realised the need to pass that year. One excelled the other in seeking pleasure. After school work, there would be a sitting upstairs in the hotel. They would play pagadé and cards. If Lachcha said he had to study, they would tease him saying that he could achieve nothing by studying. Was he a doomed man to pick up his books as early as June and July? Lachcha gradually learnt to play cards and became quite enthusiastic about the game.

Meals in the hotel were the same every day. Apart from a liberal use of pepper and tamarind, there was little else. So, at every mealtime and afterwards, there was criticism of the culinary abilities of Gota's wife as compared to Nalapaaka. After the chatter was over, it would be bedtime. Though Lachcha slept, the others devoutly played cards through the night.

Lachcha and his friends, Janardana, Ramanna and Narasimha were chatterboxes. Apart from Gota's meals, everyone made fun of the teachers at school. The story of one teacher, the loudness of another – these became the topics for discussion among them. Though Lachcha granted that food was a matter of an individual's palate, he had a grouse. His taste buds had been refined by the food at his grandfather's house where he had been looked after so well. What pleasure could he gain from saaru and an atmosphere where no one lovingly called him for lunch?

Consequently, within a fortnight of going there, he would add a couple of private holidays to Saturday and Sunday and leave for Padumunnooru. He would describe his predicament and bring back from home some happala and sandigé. But then, what could he do? If he shared them with everyone, it would all be over in a day. Nor could he eat them alone. However, he kept the ghee for himself and ate his meals well. Among his friends, Narasimha was of the same age as Lachcha. He was as sharp as small green chillies. If Lachcha took the ghee out, he would comment, 'Who is eating that smelly fat?' Lachcha would have to give him some ghee as well, saying, 'Did you say it is smelly? Try it.' The others, who learnt a lesson from that incident, would threaten, taunt or flatter Lachcha and fleece him of the ghee. He didn't like the idea of the delicacies that came from Padumunnooru or Kodi being snatched away like that. But he couldn't conquer his own desire to eat well. What could he do?

He found it hard to hold on to the chakkuli and laaddu which arrived during the Ashtami festival. After he had brought them with him, it became even more difficult to find a time when no was around to eat them. But Lachcha could not give up his appetite for them. He wouldn't feel satisfied unless he exercised his jaws under the blanket at night. For as long as three or four months, it was impossible for him to eat anything in the hotel. The snacks hidden in his case started disappearing. Eventually, unable to tolerate all this, he had to leave Gota's hotel.

By then, fortunately, Subraya Upadhyaya's son's hotel opened. His son Kitta was the manager of the hotel. It was really a small hut with a kitchen and a yard – that was all there was. Arriving there because, after all, Kitta was one among them, he found that Kitta wasn't familiar with any other culinary preparation apart from cucumber seed saaru, jackfruit seed palya and kesavina geddé curry. However, for a month, he was the only student and he had, all to himself, whatever had been sent by his mother and grandmother. But this happiness did not last for long. Some of his friends from the previous hotel came there as well. On the very day they

arrived, they told him that they knew why he had moved there. He wasn't too pleased that his friends had come again to share the delicacies from home. But their presence would be useful for playing cards. In the previous hotel, even Gota used to join them at the game of cards whenever he was free. But Kitta Upadhyaya didn't know how to play cards at all. On the other hand, he asked Rama Aithala whether his son had been sent there to play cards. Aithala was furious and scolded his son heartily. He left after Lachcha promised never to play again.

As days passed, Lachcha's wanderings around the town increased. Was it enough just to walk around? Kamti's hotel came into view whenever he went out, and the older boys would go there for refreshments. In those days, eating in a hotel was a status symbol. One of his friends took Lachcha to a hotel once to initiate him to the delicacies there. Lachcha thought that the delicacies prepared at home were tastier, and that they would do for him. Kitta Upadhyaya was not like other hotel owners. Though he was apprehensive about his culinary skills, he would show off his power before the boys as if they belonged to his household. At the same time, he had concern for them. That was why a second complaint reached Aithala about Lachcha. When the boy went home, Sarasothi had tears in her eyes. 'Lachcha, should you be eating in a Konkastha hotel? Shouldn't you think of your caste?' Lachcha himself had to console her saying that he wouldn't do such a thing again. Aithala became an incarnation of the terrifying Narasimha.

Lachcha was disgusted with the situation he was in. He thought about leaving Kitta's hotel as well. If he did his friend Narasimha would also leave along with the others, one after another. Kitta's hotel would be empty again. It was this fear that made Kitta complain to Aithala. 'If I am there, I can tell him about what he shouldn't do. Perhaps, that's why he doesn't want to stay in my hotel,' he said. Aithala thought about it deeply and decided that Lachcha shouldn't be in a place where no one could keep an eye on him. 'You must stay in Kitta's hotel. Ask for snacks to be prepared at home and

take them with you. Did we all grow up just by eating snacks?' he roared.

Lachcha was in a predicament. What sort of harassment was this? His taste buds couldn't be satisfied. He couldn't go to a hotel. To escape from Kitta's chastisement, he started eating ambodé or some such snack that was brought over from Kamti's hotel by someone. He could swear by God that he hadn't gone to a hotel, if anyone at home inquired.

That was fine but another problem arose. Where could he get the money to spend on the hotel? He couldn't eat all by himself without sharing with his friends. How could he organise it? Aithala would give money directly to Kitta's father for the boy's meals. He asked for an account of every pi before he shelled out money for items like books, and oil for the lamp. There was no one to give him money as his grandfather's people did. Lachcha felt it would have been better to have stayed on in Udupi instead of leading a sickening life here.

Rama Aithala realised how expensive high school education was. Every paisa looked like a rupee to him. Sathyabhamé would have to plead before Lachcha's demands would be approved. In such a snag, the money given for books wouldn't be enough. What was meant for school fees would be spent on refreshments. Thus, an awkward situation arose. Realising that it was no use asking for money at home, Lachcha went directly to his grandfather's house and started collecting levy. Both grandparents started giving their beloved grandson a rupee or two to spend. Lachcha was upset with his father. He thought that what Sheena Mayya had said was quite true. For his father, money was life itself. The respect that he might have had for his father was totally destroyed. However, he was happy about the way he had escaped from money problems. After he realised that the only remedy he had was lying, he looked for ways to escape from Kitta Upadhyaya's watchful eye.

About six to eight months had been spent in Kundapura. Every time he went home, Lachcha would say, 'Don't blame

me if I fail this year. There is incessant noise in Kitta's hotel made by people who come and go. It is impossible to pick up a book there. It is a nuisance, and don't say that I didn't pass because I didn't study.' Rama Aithala worried a great deal about his son. He came to Kitta's place yet again on his own. 'When the place is a hotel, people will come there for meals also. How can Kitta carry on by feeding just a few schoolboys? Can you ask people who come not to open their mouths? There is no place in the hotel. You do one thing. Find a couple of decent boys and look for a room nearby. It doesn't matter if eight annas or so will have to be paid as rent. Don't fail again and pour all the money into the estuary,' advised Aithala.

Kitta lost out a little. But he was glad as well that the boy had moved out. When it came to meals, all those wretched hotels were the same to Lachcha. But he felt he could be independent in a separate room. He would face no impediment to eating at the hotel or playing cards. So he chose a few friends with his father's permission. Narasimha, Janna, Srinivasa – all three were old offenders like himself.

Holidays arrived at the end of the year. The whole year had been spent in playing cards. Now they abandoned sleep and became bookworms day and night. Lachcha's eyes looked tired on the day of the examination. The boys even had to offer a bribe to God Kundeshwara. He would be given fruits and a coconut if they passed the examination, they vowed. However, the news in June that Lachcha had joined the fourth form made Aithala forget all his worries.

~14~

Lachcha's future progressed towards Matric. This business would last three years. He decided that he could somehow journey on with the support of his friends, the flavour of Kamti's coffee hotel, and fun and games. Fearing his father, he decided to spend his holidays at home. In between, journeys to his grandfather's house continued. He could no longer live incognito like he did the year before. Nevertheless, it was only Sarasothi who said that Kundapura didn't seem to agree with the boy. He had grown tall but had not put on weight. 'Poor soul! Can anyone eating hotel food ever put on weight?' Parothi would console her.

Parothi now looked like an old woman. Her hair had grown white due to endless worries. When Lachcha came home, he would speak to her as usual. But his feelings towards everyone at home were tinged with indifference. Sathyabhamé had become a mother of two, had been separated from both, and was being pulverised by housework.

Aithala was getting on in years. Parothi was not young any more. Though she felt tired, her liveliness hadn't decreased. At home, everyone did what they could but mere household work had become a burden on Sathyabhamé, the youngest of the three women. She also began to say, 'Ayyappa, when will these domestic chores end?' The children who cheer up one's life were not nearby. They were grown up. She was loving and zestful only when Subbi came from her husband's house. Otherwise, she was like the rest of the household.

When Lachcha came home for the holidays in May, Sarasothi said, 'Anna, Lachcha is seventeen now. Why don't you get him married ? Your hair is turning white even as we watch. Wouldn't it be good if you got him married just as you finished with Subbi's responsibility?' She brought up the topic with Lachcha as well. Though he pretended to be angry, deep inside he felt that he should also be a man like some of his friends.

Aithala had no desire to spend his cash on two weddings, one after another. Even the expenditure on his son's education had become a burden.

So, Lachchanna stepped into Kundapura for the second year without getting married. His father was eager for him to spend three more years from the fourth form to the sixth and cross the frontier. In whatever manner his pleasure was to be gained, it was obvious that money had to be spent. Every month, every week, the list of books was unending. On the pretext of some fees or the other, he would talk to his father through Sarasothi and loot money. At the same time, he continued to get money from his grandfather as well.

Meanwhile, when Rama Aithala once went to Padumunnooru, he was told that the grandson had come the previous Saturday. Hotel meals were no good at all and he had grown very thin. They had given him some ghee to take with him.

'What sort of English is this? Ten or fifteen rupees go every week for meals and books. Who knows how much it will cost by the time his education is over. Last month he took ten rupees for books.'

'Are you giving him money from there too? I was giving him money from here,' said his father-in-law. Aithala's heart missed a beat. 'Why should you give? From last year, I used to give him money for everything starting from oil for his lamp.' He wasn't aware that his son was collecting money from both parties. Grandfather's household was a little surprised as well. Madappayya was also anxious about Lachcha, for he used to say that his father wouldn't give him money and that was why he was asking grandfather. Why was he wasting so much money ? Could it be for coffee or some hotel? Aithala's conjecture was that he wouldn't need so much for coffee. He must have got into bad company and was living it up, drinking coffee and spending money on all his friends.

Grandfather was also saddened at his bad behaviour. What wretched company had he got into? 'Don't give any more cash to him. I shall talk to Dasappayya master and give him

just as much as he needs. You just give him enough for meals,' he told Aithala.

'I shall give it directly to Kitta Upadhyaya's father. You remember he came to our daughter's wedding.'

Aithala's worry about his son grew as he went home. He sent word through Subraya, who used to visit his son's hotel, that Lachcha should come home on Saturday. Lachcha was a little alarmed. 'How can I go on Saturday? I have the monthly test,' he sent back the answer and did nothing. That month, the credit in the coffee hotel was considerable and he needed cash desperately. So, he went directly to Padumunnooru. There, he told his grandmother that he needed that amount for the examination. Madappayya confronted his grandson for the first time.'You take money from your father and from here as well — by lying!' There were no words from Lachcha in reply. He wept aloud as if he was greatly hurt. For hours on end, his cheeks turned into a river of tears. Madappayya continued with his preaching. 'If you don't trust me, I shall not go to school,' Lachcha said adamantly. Grandmother saw his agony and said, 'Whatever you may say, Lachcha is not one to waste money. He might have asked for more milk and curds. He could have been scared to ask his father for more money and borrowed some from here and there.' So, she had herself shown the way out. Lachcha began sobbing again, pretended to be a better person than he really was, blamed his father, spoke of the expenditure in Kundapura in great detail and won over his grandfather with his tears.

The fourth form examination was over. Lachcha's activities went on unhindered. However, the money he used to get directly from his father stopped coming. Since Madappayya was strict about giving money, Lachcha came back owing about twenty to twenty five rupees to shops and hotels. His plan was to add it on to the amount for books for the coming year.

That summer brought many ups and downs in Aithala's life. On one side, unforeseen profits and on the other, terrible losses. Sarasothi said that Lachcha had to be married that

summer. 'Going by what you say, we must make sure that the child doesn't go astray,' Sathyabhamé said as well. However, he postponed the plan saying that the horoscope didn't find a match anywhere. His eye was on a good piece of property. On the eastern bank of the village river, someone's property had come up for sale. The owner was ready to mortgage it as well. When Aithala got the news, he realised it wouldn't be proper to ignore something that would, for two thousand rupees, bring home a great deal of profit. He started looking into his treasury. He pestered his debtors saying he needed the money and gathered all that he could. In summer, brother and sister went to see the land. Sarasothi took Lachcha for company.

That night, when she came back home, Sarasothi argued in favour of the property. 'You will never get land like that! The money that you put on it will not go anywhere.' The selling price was three thousand rupees. If it had been on mortgage, Aithala would have given two thousand. They started discussing which option was better. Aithala was ready for whatever would cost less. But Sarasothi said that the owner might take back the land some day if it was mortgaged. Since what she said gave rise to the doubt that Sheena Mayya might himself make the profit by buying the land outright, Aithala had to listen to her.

'All right, let's buy it,' he said.

He was ready to do anything to score over Sheena Mayya, if it didn't result in loss but helped him to show off! Within a week, the property was registered and bought. It became big news in the village. 'That fool gave off the property to Aithala for three thousand! When I was ready here with five thousand, shouldn't he ask me once?' Sheena Mayya spoke out.

Lachchanna slept in the same courtyard the night they arrived at the decision to buy the property. He thought that his father was just being greedy in wanting the land. He never guessed that he had the wherewithal to talk in thousands. Even as he was thinking about how Appayya had talked of two thousand and then three thousand, and wondering who had so

much money, Aithala told Sarasothi that the property had been registered that afternoon. Three thousand rupees, and some twenty five rupees over and above that, had been spent. That was something which Lachcha couldn't believe. He had grown up in his grandfather's place amidst prosperity. But he had seen his grandfather hold back in matters of cash payment in thousands. He felt proud and disgusted at the same time about his father. 'In spite of having so much money, what's the point in living such a life of denial? If I ask for eight rupees, his eyes start glinting.' But he was happy inside to discover that they were not poor. So, he started thinking about how he could make a part of the wealth leak into his pocket. That was the only job he had for quite a few days. Carefully watching his father's movements in and out of the house, peeping stealthily, he still couldn't find out where his father kept the money. There was no chest in the house; no box, either. Moreover, his father didn't have a head for figures.

Within a week of Aithala buying the property, pregnant Subbi came to her mother's house. The concern and hospitality that Aithala, Lachcha's mother, Doddamma and aunt showed towards her could not be put into words. There was no delicacy that wasn't prepared to fulfil her desires. There was no falling short in hospitality. That was enough to make Lachcha feel somewhat jealous. Didn't sons desire delicacies as well? He felt a general disdain for women. He was very displeased at the way everything was prepared and offered first to Subbi. Once in a while, when he was served, he started spewing venom saying that Kittu's cucumber saaru was enough for him. Then his mother Sathyabhamé would also get angry and wonder aloud where he got his meanness from. Lachcha would also fret but showed no inclination to change his ways,

Aithala was extremely happy to see his grandson. On the day Subbi gave birth to a boy, everyone at home praised Aneguddé Ganapathi over and over again. Aithala thought of sending Lachcha to Mandarthi with the good news. 'Lachcha, when you were born, your uncle himself gave me the good news. You go to Mandarthi now and give your brother-in-law the news.'

'I don't know how to go to Mandarthi,' Lachcha said.

'Take Soora with you. He knows the way.'

'I cannot walk.'

'If you can walk from Kundapura to Padumunnooru, can't you walk from here to there?'

'Just because I have walked over roads, it does not mean that I can walk over hills.'

It was the first battle between father and son. Sathyabhamé was angry. 'Why do you ask him? He couldn't stand Subbi even when she was pregnant. How will he go and ask his brother-in-law to come over?'

'There is no need for him to go, Anna. Good news should be given by elders. You stay here. If the new mother falls ill or something, somebody will have to be here to Attend to her. I will go and be back soon,' Sarasothi said and started off.

Aithala was stubborn 'Lachcha, that was about Mandarthi. Is it possible for you to go to your grandfather's house with the news? Your grandmother would surely want to see you.'

'Send Soora there.'

'This boy doesn't belong here, he is just a relative,' Sathyabhamé said.

'If he doesn't carry the message there, don't give him lunch,' Aithala ordered. Lachcha was downcast but his eyes widened. 'I won't die without a meal,' he said angrily and walked away. Aithala said nothing, for he wanted to see what Lachcha would do. He didn't come for lunch. Parothi said that he might have gone to his grandfather's. 'Don't trust him at all. We must think that it was by mistake that he was born into this family. Let's send Soora to Padumunnooru.'

So it was Soora who went there.

He came back the same evening. 'Our Lachcha master was in the verandah. When I told the big master, he asked me when the baby was born. It appears that Lachchanna's

grandmother is not very well. The master said that he would come after a few days.'

'Lachcha has gone there and still has not told them about Subbi's baby. Did you see that?' Aithala was furious. On hearing that his mother-in-law was not well, he decided to go to Padumunnooru that night itself. Eventually, he waited for his son-in-law to arrive. Sarasothi arrived with him at midnight to be greeted with a warm welcome. The next day Aithala called Sarasothi. 'Sathya's mother is not well. Soora came back and told us. I haven't even told Sathya about it. I will just go and see what the matter is. Take care of the house.' He told her to be careful and went off to do his duty.

What awaited him there was enough to dampen his joy at having bought some property cheap as well of getting a grandson His mother-in-law was tossing around on her death bed. She was over sixty and was suffering from fever and pain brought about by rheumatism. She was waiting for death. Though her body pulled her towards the destination, her spirit was stubbornly wanting to live.

'Rama, you have arrived! Am I not going to get better? I want to see Subbi's child and I don't care if I am burnt to ashes after that,' she said with longing.

Aithala told the mother-in-law, 'Atté, why do you worry? Nothing will happen to you. You will see the child. Subbi is also longing to see you.'

'God must have spared me till now so that I could see the face of that child. If not, why didn't I die last year itself?'

The old woman started thinking of nothing else but her great grandson. From that day, Aithala started travelling up and down between Kodi and Padumunnooru. Since Lachcha was always in hiding whenever he arrived, Aithala stopped bothering about him. Sathyabhamé too came often to see her mother. Eventually, the longing of the bedridden woman became very strong. 'Do you want to kill me just like that? Shouldn't I hold my great grandson? At the most, I can live for one more day,' she said as she wept. Madappayya and the son-in-law, sitting before her, didn't know what to do. It was

indisputable that she was nearing death. Who should cross the river to meet the other? The four-day old great grandson or the old woman staring death in the face? Madappayya's courage was his strongest trait. He called his son. 'Son, send for a palanquin. She shouldn't die with her desire unfulfilled.'

As evening fell, as the heat of the sun began to subside, Madappayya got together a team and set off on an adventure of unusual gravity. His son-in-law was with him. Everyone was scared. What if something happened on the way? But the smile that broke out on the old woman's face and the lustre in her eyes at the thought of seeing her great grandson were the incomparable graces of life. Before the evening light vanished, the old woman was brought down from the palanquin to Subbi's side. Near Subbi's baby boy! The old woman widened her dimmed eyes in the light of the lantern. 'May I hold him?' she asked. Sathyabhamé held the child in front of her hands. It was there that the old woman's eyes were fixed. A shower of pearls fell from the eyes of everyone standing around. 'My desire is fulfilled,' the old woman said. She closed her eyes for a minute. She opened her eyes afterwards and said in a low voice, 'Not here. Let's go there,' gesturing to her husband.

The procession started again and the palanquin returned to Padumunnooru. She was brought down and laid on the bed. The old woman started breathing hard and the warmth of her life left her body. Madappayya aged a hundred times over and Rama Aithala became an infant. The only face that wasn't seen either here or there was Lachcha's.

Subbi was terribly unhappy to hear about her grandmother's death. 'My bad luck!' she moaned and Sarasothi consoled her. 'Didn't her final longing get fulfilled because of your child?'

Rama Aithala performed the naming ceremony of his grandson and helped in the obsequies as well. The joy of one was drained away in the sorrow of the other. Like a laughing, rolling wave, that moves four times swifter than a tidal wave, only to plunge towards the bottom of the sea, his joy bloomed and then collapsed in his anxiety over his father-in-law's having

to spend his days in solitude. It took root as a worry. 'Am I young? I am over sixty. Maybe, the time for me to escape from this game of illusion will arrive soon.' As he thought about it often, Lachcha came to his mind as well. 'Where is he?' Aithala asked. 'He must be over there. Let him be there to keep his grandfather company,' Parothi said.

Then Aithala remembered that he hadn't seen him even at the moment of his grandmother's death. 'He will be just as helpful in keeping his grandfather happy as he was with his grandmother. He is a faithless dog!' Parothi tried very hard to console his disturbed mind.

Sarasothi came in. 'Anna, perform Lachcha's wedding as soon as possible. No one can be certain what might happen here.'

'You are foolish, Sarasothi. Does the world go round because of us? Moreover, let there be no talk of the wedding this summer.' After many days, Lachcha arrived home from his grandfather's. Holidays would be over in a week and school would start. He could not avoid seeing his father at least for the sake of money. However, Rama Aithala paid no heed to his presence. With the sole idea of provoking his attention, Lachcha started visiting Sheena Mayya often and everyday. Sheena Mayya's face too was getting wrinkled. But his energy, his raving and insolence were still in display. He was maddened by the fact that Rama Aithala had pocketed the property on the other side of the river for a mere three thousand. So, he had proclaimed that Aithala was a great enemy of his. Moreover, he possessed all the fields around Aithala's land. That effort had been going on for a long time. Within three years of his acquiring the final portion of a field, he raised its level over by a foot on the pretext of adding manure. During the fourth year, he planted coconut saplings and built a shed for the workers. During the rainy season that year, Aithala had the experience of having this Chakrabheema's fort around him. It obstructed the path to his field which became a tank during the rainy season. 'Let me see, I shall drag Rama to court or let him fall at my feet,' declared Sheena Mayya and continued being stubborn. To save his seed bed, Aithala had to go to

court. His pride was no less than Sheena's. He would go to the high court if need be. It was not a big issue. But what he did not like at all was the fact that Lachcha went on visiting Sheena despite being told not to.

Summer was over and school began in June. Lachcha went back. By God's grace, he got through that year as well 'He doesn't need to go to school. Let him eat and sit around here,' Aithala said. 'Are you foolish?' asked Sathyabhamé. 'Should he stay here to make others in the house unhappy?' 'Anna, whatever is written on his forehead by Brahma will come to pass. You pay whatever fine you need to. What God wills will happen,' Sarasothi said. So, Lachcha's education continued.

Lachcha went back to school without having to bother about anyone. Soon after, Aithala had to travel to Kundapura once in a while. A dispute went on in court against Sheena Mayya for his having destroyed Aithala's field. While Sheena Mayya paid money to the newly appointed jutka service, Aithala walked all the way, to and fro.

Lachcha was in fifth form. Just a year later, it would be Matric. That year too, there was no hotel available except Kittu Upadhyaya's. But it had grown in the last three years. Kittu had rented a big house. 'Aithalaré, if your son stays upstairs in my house instead of somewhere else, I can keep an eye on him. If you give me half of what you pay as rent there, it will be enough,' he said. Rama Aithala's order to Lachcha followed soon. 'Our office will be in Kittu's attic,' Lachcha started telling everyone. His old friends were there to stand by him.

It was not just that Kittu had extended his hotel. He lived there with his wife, so at least the cucumber seed saaru would be tasty. There were curds and ghee for those who paid a rupee more. As if that was not enough, he started telling those who came to him that instead of their having to eat snacks and drink coffee at hotels run by other castes, he would make arrangement for them in his own hotel. He got together with a friend who had been to Bangalore and back,

to start a coffee hotel along with meals. The credit for the great moral deed of protecting the brahminism of Kota from the Konkanastha folk should go to Kitta.

Lachcha managed to stay in the hotel for a year. Being under Kittu's wing, he was afraid to carry on all his transactions as before for fear of his father's disapproval, and so he visited other places too. Kittu walked a thorny path all year long. He had to suffer since he could neither speak out nor stay quiet.

Kittu's hotel became Lachchanna's field of activity. The attic there was where he held court. His studies became unimportant. Chatting, fun and games became subjects of learning. It shouldn't be assumed that he never studied at all. Narasimha of his own age or Janardana, two years his senior, studied as much as he did. He was as intelligent as anyone else. But recently, his mind had begun to wander increasingly away from studies. In tune with their age, their conversation moved beyond the world of boys and flowed towards the appraisal of a couple of girls at school. They were drawn by them while walking on the road. Janna was the oldest among Lachcha's friends and so, was the leader in such matters. Their everyday conversation overflowed with vulgar jokes. Once in a while, Janna would ask Lachcha, 'Let's go there. Come with me.' Lachcha was adventurous but he was shy as well. Janna's words of encouragement were futile. Though Lachcha ridiculed him openly, he did feel within that Janna was more courageous than himself.

His most intimate friend was Narasimha. Their friendship had no room for secrets. So, he was the only one who could help Lachcha fulfil his desires. If Narasimha was given coffee regularly, he would be prepared to do anything. So, he took up the job of delivering mail for Lachcha.

Lachcha was attracted by Sanjeevi, a beautiful girl who came to school. Though they had nothing to do there, they roamed around the streets where she usually walked. She wasn't indifferent to him. Narasimha as the postman went back and forth between the two. To all appearances, Sanjeevi's people were like any other family in the place, poor enough

to take on an additional job to make both ends meet. Lachcha met Sanjeevi at her place one evening. Narasimha waited for him outside on the street, got fed up and returned to the hotel. Kittu Upadhyaya was angry when Lachcha did not come back for dinner. 'The mathematics teacher wanted me to see him and so I was late,' explained Lachcha when he came back to the hotel, thus escaping chastisement.

After that, both Lachcha and Narasimha would sneak out after dinner. It had to be done without the knowledge of Janna, the senior. A pretext had to be thought of. A teacher of theirs lived in a house that was a little beyond Sanjeevi's. So, they started going to him for tuition at night. Aithala felt that it wouldn't matter if a couple of rupees more were spent if it meant that the boy was going to the teacher to learn.

But Lachcha's pocket was too small to enable him to lead his newfound life of pleasure. He was responsible for the excesses of his friends as well. His grandfather didn't swallow his lies. Once, he started a big to-do at the hotel. He said he had absent-mindedly left his chain in the bathroom and couldn't find it when he went to look for it. The chain made it possible for him to sustain his love affair for a couple of months. Aithala cursed his son's carelessness for the loss of the chain. Kittu wept because, as a result, there was a blot on the good name of his hotel.

Janna would be meditating all alone in the hotel attic while Lachcha and Narasimha went to the teacher's house on the pretext of tuition. It became a routine for them to take lessons in love as well, along with their tuition, and get back late to their quarters.

Janna couldn't stand their daily late-coming and started to ridicule them. From then on, they started planning to guard each other's honour. But who should guard the honour of their pockets? Lachcha had accumulated credit in the shop and in the hotel, and school fees had not been paid fully. Complaints from creditors reached the hotel and were carried to Aithala. He had to be content with raising his voice high. At first, he thought of getting out of the predicament by giving

the cash to Upadhyaya instead of to his son. Grandfather's household suggested that money shouldn't be given to him at all.

Lachcha's tears were useless. He started getting calls from Sanjeevi every day. Like an animal caught in a net, he confronted his friend, demanding the return of the money he had borrowed.'Who told you to give it to me?' Narasimha asked. The result was that their friendship came to an end and only Janna and Kittu stayed in the hotel.

Something very strange happened in Aithala's house that year. Twenty to thirty rupees in cash was stolen one day from his hole-in-the-wall treasury. He was worried and asked Sathyabhamé. 'You were not at home. Lachcha had come then. He came in the morning and went back in the evening,' she said. His suspicion fell on his son. When could he ask him? When they met a month later, he confronted his son. 'I swear on God I didn't do it,' answered Lachcha.

Aithala couldn't but believe his son. Eventually, he had to doubt his own accounting which he did by marking strokes. The reason was that he believed it was impossible for anyone else to know the whereabouts of his treasury.

Lachcha stopped going to the teacher all of a sudden on the pretext of not having the money. He gave up wandering in the dark and became respectable. The main reason was that he was empty-handed. When Lachcha went home again, Aithala had shifted his treasury to another spot.

When Lachcha was in a desperate state, Janna became his guide. He knew that Janna's family was not as well off as his own was. But, judging from his conversation, Lachcha realised that he was involved in more love affairs than himself. But he had never openly asked Janna who his friends were. However, he was eager to listen to the story of his affairs. In that situation, it was now Lachcha's turn to spy on him. His suspicions that Janna must have gradually developed an intimacy with the mistress of the hotel grew strong. While the husband was working in the coffee hotel, Janna would come back with the excuse of a headache or something, and find time for love. One day, Lachcha spoke to him in a quiet tone.

'Janna, if one has friends at all, they must be like you. Even though I have treated you with so many cups of coffee, your secret is still in your fist.' 'What secret do I have?' asked Janna. 'I know,' said Lachcha laughingly. When probed, he smiled and said, 'Ja...la...ja,' pronouncing every syllable separately. Janna's face fell and he had to confess. Jalaja was Kittu's wife.

What then? The desire within Lachcha was just as strong. The hero who, desiring Jalaja's friendship, had rushed into the bathroom forgetfully while she was still there, now was more daring. Going for a bath before she did, he would leave a few coins there. He would go back later to look, and not finding them, would say, 'Did you take them? Never mind....' This kind of behaviour became routine. As if that was not enough, he started flattering her cooking. 'Nowadays, Jalajamma cooks like Nala.' This went on for a long time. Janna would join him as well and add refinement to the flattery.

And so, the girl, who was of the same age as Lachcha, was drawn towards him too.

That year was over and Lachcha stepped into the Matric class. Janna failed and became his classmate. Aithala was indifferent towards his son at that time. The state of Kittu's hotel was very bad. The partnership of the coffee hotel did not run along the right lines and so it had to be closed. That meant he had to stay at the meals hotel all morning long. Half of Jalajamma's managerial responsibility came back into his hands and she became the mistress of only the kitchen. The change came very much in the way of Lachcha and Janna's fun and frolic. Kittu noticed how they went into the kitchen ever so many times on the pretext of wanting water, and Jalaja smilied at them. With this, suspicion and envy flared up, and he began to mock and hurt his wife for no reason whatsoever. As the trouble between them grew, Jalajakshi's mind snapped and went on to devise secret schemes.

Kittu Upadhyaya was in a dilemma. He didn't like the way Jalajakshi was behaving. To put an end to it, he had to get rid of Janna and Lachcha. Whenever Rama Aithala came

to the hotel, he would complain. 'Maharayaré, your boy doesn't listen to me. His showing off, his conversation, the hour when he comes back — I can't stand them any more. All the boys who come here are getting spoilt by him,' he said. However, he could not bring himself to say what the real reason was. 'Maharaya,' Aithala said, 'He is at least this bearable because he stays here. If he was in someone else's hotel, he would have become much worse. If he finishes his Matric this year, that will be the end of his education.'

Kittu Upadhyaya was in a dilemma yet again. He got rid of Janna saying he hadn't paid money for meals. He held his anger in check hoping that Lachcha would improve his behaviour if Janna left. Jalajakshi's mind grew more perturbed with Janna's exit. She also started taunting her husband. Kittu was saddened because he had moved into the city and had ruined himself within two years. Once in a month or a week, he would stop talking to his wife and make up again soon after. This was the only job he had on hand.

Wasn't there any life left in Kittu? The love that he had claimed as his right from Jalaja had collapsed. As a result, his lust looked for revenge. If he shouted at her, he would have to close down the hotel and go back to cooking for someone. If his father, Subraya, got to know of the state of affairs, he might even have to marry again. Somehow, the end of the hotel business seemed near. So, in order to find some satisfaction within the existing circumstances, he let himself go astray as well.

Lachcha's study for Matric progressed slowly. But the speed at which days passed that year could not be put into words.

~15~

Even as Lachcha was thinking why the damned holidays arrived every year, holidays did arrive. Since the Matric examination was over, holidays started at the beginning of April itself and found him in Kodi. He was worried about when the damned living in the wilderness would end. There was no joy in Padumunnooru either, even if he went there after getting fed up in Kodi. There, his grandfather's age was eating up his whole body. He was counting the days, hours and minutes and Lachcha could have no fun in his company. Nevertheless, he started wandering between the two insipid places. In between, he would steal into Kundapura as well. Schools and courts were closed and so Kittu Upadhyaya had closed the hotel and gone back home. The fact that Jalajamma lived in his neighbourhood brought unprecedented joy to Lachcha. So, he cooked up an excuse amd went to Subraya Upadhyaya's house to make it known that he was in the village as well.

Sarasothi was bringing pressure on her brother to have Lachcha married at least that year after Subraya Upadhyaya's wife whispered certain complaints in her ear. Sarasothi was terrified. Once, coming back after grazing cattle, she saw Lachcha walking by a cashew tree in a stealthy manner. 'Is that Lachcha? Why is he here?' she wondered, and being half-blind, went closer. All at once, she saw another person moving away from there. Subraya Upadhyaya's house was on the other side of the path and Sarasothi suspected that it must have been Jalajakshi.

She felt feverish. She said nothing there or then, and came home chanting 'Shiva, Shiva.' Lachcha might or might not have suspected that she knew but he pretended as if nothing had happened. When Aithala came home after finishing his priestly duties, it was night time. When he came to the tank to wash his feet, Sarasothi stood waiting for him at the entrance. Before he could ask her why she was standing there,

tears sprang to her eyes. She described what she had seen and heard. She had known by looking at the boy's vacant face and wandering eyes for the last two years that he had a problem. She said everything she had to. 'Whatever it be, just give him advice, whether he listens to you or not. Get him married. All this has happened because you didn't listen to what I said about getting him married much earlier.'

Aithala came home and finished his prayers. He didn't say a thing until then. Eventually, he called Lachcha, who was lying down but wasn't asleep. When Aithala called again, the boy got up saying that he couldn't even sleep in that house. 'Though his father said that you had ruined Kittu Upadhyaya's honour, I didn't believe him. I now know everything. Instead of doing all this, you could have told me to get you married. If the whole town comes to know of your friendship with Jalajamma, what will happen to your honour? What will be your parents' worth?' Aithala said. Lachcha made a wry face. 'Listening to all sorts of people, you also say unjust things to me,' he said angrily. 'What do you mean? Is it untrue that Sarasothi saw you both this evening?' Aithala asked. Lachcha was unmoved. 'She can't even see in daytime leave alone being able to see in the evening!' he said.

Rama Aithala raised his hand but didn't have the strength to strike. He knew Lachcha's ways. He knew that it was a disease which had no cure. His response was clear. 'If you are going to carry on like this, don't stay in my house. Our obligation towards each other is over. I am not your father and you are not my son. My money, and whatever I made squeezing out my existence are for Subbi, not for you. Until you admit you were wrong, and that what you said to Sarasothi was wrong, you won't get rice in this house.' Furious, he went and lay down. Sathyabhamé learnt about everything from him and said that she hadn't imagined that her son would turn out like that.

Lachcha stood there like a pillar for a long time, got tired, went out and sat on the beach behind the house. He counted all the stars in the sky. The sun rose and morning broke. But he was too ashamed and too proud to yield. He also

knew that he had nowhere to go if his father threw him out of the house. The next day, he camped the whole morning in the honné grove.

Parothi too came to know of Lachcha's history and her insides simmered at her son's wickedness. She knew that he could not be captured once he was thrown out. She was an old woman now, very old. Though she was younger than Sarasothi, she had no strength to walk around. Nevertheless, she wandered over the beach, the village, and the harvested fields looking for her son. She couldn't eat in the afternoon. 'Sarasothi, please advise him,' she said, knowing that Rama Aithala would not change his mind. 'Parothi, you are under an illusion. If we are not stern at least once, he won't become good. If he gets hungry, he may come home,' Sarasothi said. Parothi fasted regardless. She went out again in the evening to look for her son. She moved around the honné grove. There was Lachcharaya the Great, gloomy-faced, established on a low-hanging branch. 'Child, listen to me. Come home,' she said. Lachcha came down but didn't speak. 'Child, come home,' she said again. 'He won't let me come home,' said Lachcha. 'Shouldn't those that do something wrong say sorry and promise they won't do it again?' Lachcha sobbed aloud. Parothi's heart melted. The way he used to cry for Doddamma and the games he would play when he was young flashed before her eyes. 'Lachcha, is there a greater life for a man than an honourable one?' she asked. Lachcha accepted that she was right.

'Is it difficult to say sorry to Sarasothi?'

'I shall say it to her but won't go before father.'

'If you stay quiet, he will feel consoled. He is not made of stone. How can he be your enemy when he married again to find salvation through a son?'

Parothi brought Sarasothi for the reconciliation. Lachcha, in disgrace, said sorry.

'It is enough if you don't do such things again. No one can erase what has been done already.'

'As you say.'

'God willing, I shall quickly bring home a girl as a match for you.'

'As you wish.'

'Look, child. When Sheena Mayya's sons brought money in basins and pots and gave their father a good name, should you take away the good name of a man who is already respectfully called Kodi Aithalaru?'

Like a hurricane or incessant rain stopping all of a sudden, the wind of commotion that blew hard in the household subsided. Rama Aithala felt no desire to talk to his son but his anger was gone. 'Let it be. I will find a good girl and get him married. Let him become respectable as least as a result of her worthiness,' he thought. The very next day, he began looking for horoscopes.

'These are children of today. Your Lachcha may say he wants to see the girl himself. Look for someone fair with good limbs and eyes. He shouldn't get back to his old ways in future,' said Sarasothi when Aithala was leaving. He agreed.

He wandered around in the sun for seven days and had horoscopes brought over from many places he knew. As soon as they heard that Lachcha would be married, the people of the villages around came forward with their own girls. Aithala had two conditions : the horoscopes should match and Lachcha too should approve. Similarly, even in Padumunnooru, the quest for a suitable girl went on. In between, Aithala had to think of Lachcha's future. What would happen after Matric? Become a clerk somewhere in Kundapura? Or do something else? He pondered over it. Sarasothi didn't want him to study any further. 'What will happen to life in the house after you? Should your priesthood end with you?' she asked Aithala.

'How many things should I think of? You tell me. Do you think Lachcha will now look after the fields and cultivation? It will be a favour if he doesn't sell the fields off cheap,' he replied.

His hope that his son would study English and bring him a good name had ended a long time ago. But he still

hoped that Matric would not be the last step. Just then, he heard that the lawyer from Airodi, Vasudevayya, had come to his village. The lawyer's house was among those which Aithala visited as a priest. If one went straight and crossed the river at the eastern point, Airodi would appear straightaway. If one stood on the northern beach, the tiled house seen among coconut trees in the field in the front was the lawyer's. Vasudevayya came home only during the holidays in May. He practised law in Mangalore during the rest of the year. His brother looked after the house in his absence. It was a prosperous household and it was a tradition of the villagers to ask for the lawyer's advice on any matter arising in the village. Moreover, a Mangalore lawyer was considered to be one of a high order. Rama Aithala went there, chanting 'Hari, Hari.' The lawyer too was very fond of Aithala. He had a mat spread as soon as he saw Aithala and refreshments were served.

'My son has finished his Matric. It means the examination is over and he says he will pass. I am thinking about what he could do in future. What could he do if he was made to stay in the village? That's why I came to you – so I can seek your advice,' said Aithala. The lawyer knew that Aithala was well off.

'Why shouldn't he be sent to do his B.A.? Or, he can become a doctor or something like that.'

'Become a doctor?' Aithala was amazed.

'Ha, you are Vaidik brahmins! And you are not allowed to cut up a dead body.'

'You are making fun of us. Exclude that possibility. Tell me of something else he can do.'

'In our days, even if one studied only up to Matric, it was possible to a little bit of advocacy. But now, one should be a B.A., B.L.. Before all that, one should study for two years and pass F.A. Wouldn't it be better to think of the future after that?'

'Do you think so?'

'That's the way it is. However, shouldn't you find out what your son thinks?'

'Why should he be asked? Does he have that much intelligence?'

'Whether he is intelligent or not, he should still be asked. The one who studies is not the father. It's the son, isn't it?'

'You are right.'

'Bring him over. He has studied English, hasn't he? Let us find out if it is town English or village English.' Aithala agreed to do so and left for home after lunch.

After he left, lawyer Vasudevayya's brother Narayanayya spoke to him. 'Anna, instead of looking for a bridegroom for your daughter here and there, why don't you consider this boy if the horoscopes agree? Aithala will not speak of it himself. He may think that prosperous people will not consider giving their daughter to a family like his. Our Aithala is no mean person. Every field in Kodi is either mortgaged to Sheena Mayya or to him.'

'Is he so well-off?'

'In our village itself, he pays tax of over a hundred rupees. Over there in Kodi, he must have taxable land worth at least two hundred rupees. Over and above that, he must be having at least eight to ten thousand in cash. Some people say that he owned this amount even during the time of his father's death. You cannot judge him by the dhoti he wears.'

The lawyer also thought that a big question would be answered if the horoscopes agreed. He had four sons and two daughters. The elder girl was the one ready for marriage. Her name was Nagaveni. She had completed her eleventh year and was stepping into the twelfth. When would she get married if not now? The father was concerned about it as well. Though he was established in Mangalore, he had to look for marital connections in his own village.

The next day, keeping his word, Aithala arrived at the lawyer's soon after dawn broke. His Highness Lachcha was with him, well combed, his tuft tied, and dressed in white. He had worn his coat and jubba though it was a hot day. There was a water-proof umbrella in his hand.

As they came to the pandal by the portal, Narayanayya received them. 'So, have father and son come together? Please come. Annayya has gone to see our new seed-bed. A hundred coconut saplings have been planted. He has gone to have a look.' 'Is that so? Well, never mind. I have no duty to perform today — Shraddha, Shanthi or whatever. I shall wait here,' said Aithala. As they sat talking, three or four children came out shouting and laughing. Nagaveni, who was wearing a small black saree and had her hair in tight plaits, was young but had a well-developed body. She was going to school. When they came there in the excitement of some game or the other, their uncle scolded them. 'Thoo, go in. You have come here too, as if the yard wasn't enough.' The group of children vanished quietly.

'They are my brother's children. When they come home, they bring the whole house down.'

'Is that girl your daughter?' Aithala asked.

'My daughter is eight years old. This one is older. She is my brother's daughter, Nagaveni. You might not have seen her before. They come here once in two or three years,' said Narayanayya.

Lachcha's eyes wandered towards the girl. He thought his father had brought him there to talk about his further education but these words set off another train of thought. His face, which had been lacklustre so far, bloomed with a smile. Narayanayya sat them down in the verandah. 'Will you take some water, coffee, hesaru ganji, or coconut water?' he asked. 'Ayyayyo, I don't want coffee. That's for modern people. If we old ones drink it, the body gets heated up. I don't want anything at all,' said Aithala.

'Chee, how can you say that? You have hesaru ganji then, and your son may like some coffee. We shall have them prepared,' Narayanayya said, and went in.

Father and son sat in the verandah like two distant relatives. The father didn't look at the son. The son didn't look at the father either. As they sat meditating thus, the lawyer came back. 'Is this your son? Where is he studying? In Kundapura? In Udupi?' he asked as soon as he came.

Within a short time, coffee, hesaru ganji and fried happala arrived and the lawyer joined in. 'Aithalaré, you can see your son as proof of the passing of old times. He has started drinking coffee. I cannot manage without coffee every day.' In return for his hospitality, Aithala said, 'Ayyo, you are a lawyer. It is all right for you. Coffee may be needed for town weather. But why do the village chaff need it? Is there any sense in old men drinking coffee as well, like Sheena Mayya who does it because of the wind blowing from Bengalooru?' So, conversation flowed towards Sheena Mayya. It moved on to the income of his children as well. The names of a few others who had made money from running hotels came in.

'That is much better than being a lawyer waiting for someone's recommendation of his name for registration.'

'That's right. Our Subraya Upadhyaya is going to tile his house this year. All that he has is a hut-like hotel in Kundapura.'

'Is there a hotel in Kundapura run by a person from Kota?' Pride in his caste flowed from the lawyer.

The guests were asked to stay on for lunch. 'You have not spoken about the future,' said Aithala eagerly. The son needed to be spoken to in that regard but he said nothing at all. The lawyer guessed that he was silent because his father was present. Soon he started speaking in a way Aithala wouldn't understand. 'You are in the Matriculation class.' 'Yes,' came the answer. The rest of the conversation took place in English. Even during lunch, English held sway. Lachcha was in a dilemma. The lawyer's eldest son, Sadashiva, who was his own age, sat at the end of the row beside him but Lachcha couldn't engage him in any talk. Neither was there a way he could catch sight of the girl who had come in a flash and disappeared. The barrage of the lawyer's questions continued.

He disappeared awhile after lunch. Sadashiva, who had been waiting all the time to talk to this English hero, got set to do so. They went up to the attic as they conversed and the lawyer sat chatting to Aithala in the verandah. 'The boy is smart. He knows English well. If he passes, let him do his

F.A.,' he said. Aithala asked about details of future expenditure. 'Where should he stay? In a hotel or somewhere else?' he asked. 'Won't it be enough to decide about all that when the time comes for him to leave? Don't you have the wherewithal to spend thirty rupees a month?' the lawyer queried. Aithala didn't pretend to be poor.

Conversation extended to other matters gradually. 'Aithalaré, send your son's horoscope. Let's have a look. Or, you can take Nagaveni's horoscope.' the lawyer said. Aithala was dumbfounded. When the lawyer asked why he said nothing, Aithala said, 'Well, people like you asking for a boy from amongst us, Vaidik slaves of custom!' 'All that belongs to the past. Now it is enough if one knows English. Who will bother about useless information? If your son's horoscope matches our daughter's, is there anything that will come in the way?' the lawyer asked. Aithala expressed his happiness.

When evening fell, Aithala asked where his son was. He came down with Sadashiva. After an hour or two of getting acquainted, they appeared as if they had been friends for ages. Lachchanna invited him to come home as well. 'Aithalaré, the two Englishmen have got together. That is my eldest son Sadashiva. He is also taking his Matric this year. So, even as we watch, their friendship has grown,' said the lawyer, looking at the two boys.

Aithala took home Nagaveni's horoscope. He sat in front of the dim light of the lantern studying it and came to the conclusion that the girl was meant only for his boy. 'When the lawyer himself has agreed, what else is left? The boy has seen the girl. If his opinion is asked for and given, we can go ahead with the discussion tomorrow itself,' he decided. That very night he talked with the family. 'God willing, if this marriage comes through, a big burden will be off our backs. Even if the studies are continued, we are assured of a good place where he can stay. I don't have to die in my old age worrying about him.'

While Lachcha was thinking that he had been taken there only in connection with the wedding, and what would be

the damned outcome if the horoscopes didn't agree, Sarasothi arrived as an ambassador. 'If that lawyer whose house you visited today, brings up the topic of your marriage with his daughter, don't say no. Family, morals , wealth — they have everything and we shall never find an alliance with such a family elsewhere.' 'Do I ever say no to what you say?' came the answer. She also decided that the moment had arrived for the boy to reform.

After lunch the next day, choosing an auspicious time, Aithala travelled to Airodi with both horoscopes. Lachcha was craving to ask if he could come too. Scared of what Aithala would say, he stood facing the east until his father crossed the river.

Aithala returned in the evening. He stepped into the yard, shaking the dust off his feet. 'Sathya, Sarasothi, it is not untrue that everything will fall into place when God chooses the moment,' he said. Everyone gathered around curious to know what he meant. The one who didn't join in was Lachcha. But he had his ears pricked up to hear what was being said.

'They want the marriage performed before this summer is over. After that, the lawyer says, the responsibility of his son-in-law is his,' said Aithala, conveying the good news.

The news reached Padumunnooru the very next day. The old man heard the news and said, 'Let Lachcha come here for a while. How many days more do I have left? After he leaves for Mangalore, I am not sure I will be around when he returns.' Lachcha went there to get his grandfather's blessing. Aithala's household began getting ready for a wedding. Pandal, floor, happala, sandigé — work went on at a great speed. Subraya Upadhyaya got ready to become a trusted helper. Parothi, Sathyabhamé and Sarasothi worked without a break. The news of the wedding spread to fourteen villages. If it was merely the wedding of Aithala's son, there wouldn't have been so much excitement. The news acquired added lustre because it was the wedding of the Mangalore lawyer's daughter, a wedding in an eminent household of Airodi.

The news seemed a matter of amusement to some. There were also people who were happy and some who were envious. 'It doesn't matter if they lose their caste, but they are happy,' said some others. Sheena Mayya wondered what wretched circumstances had made the lawyer seek an alliance with Aithala. Vasudevayya was a famous lawyer in Mangalore. As the registration matters regarding his field weren't working out in Kundapura, he had decided that Vasudevayya was the right person to take up the case and submit an appeal. Under such circumstances, Sheena Mayya was not happy that the alliance should take place. Nevertheless, he took the records of the registration and went there with the purpose of talking to the lawyer. But when he saw the pandal and the preparations, he did not have the courage to say that the alliance was thoughtlessly entered into, and so he just returned home.

Rama Aithala couldn't tighten his fist because it was a relationship with the lawyer. He had no intention of doing so either. He called his son-in-law and grandson on the very day the wedding was fixed.. Lachcha didn't exhibit his earlier incarnation either. Probably because he had gained his heart's desire, he behaved well with everyone. But he didn't have a deep regard for Subbi's husband who didn't know English.

Vaishakha Bahula Somavara arrived. From either side of the Hangarakatte harbour, rockets and fireworks started creating a din right from the morning. In the afternoon, immaculate silken clothes appeared all along the edges of the fields in the east. Sheena Mayya had received invitations from both sides. He had no desire to go but it wouldn't be appropriate if he stayed away altogether. So, he didn't go to the bridegroom's place but went to the lawyer's house and sat among the retinue.

The wedding procession left the bridegroom's house in the evening. All the paraphernalia that had been arranged for the wedding emerged with great splendour. People in the procession, pipers, people carrying umbrellas and festoons, palanquin bearers and, as if that was not enough, the band sent by the orders of the lawyer himself, stretched from the edge of the beach to the edge of the river. The lawyer's brother

Narayanayya had said that a mere band was not enough. There should be a pair of elephants as well, he had said. Aithala had agreed, considering he had only one son, and had brought over two elephants from the matha. As soon as they crossed the river, the procession went towards the pandal along with the elephants at the time of Godhuli, the time when cattle raise dust while going home. Aithala had sent word to Sheena Mayya over and over again but got the information that he wasn't at home.

In the land measuring sixty hané in front of the lawyer's house, the processions from both sides met. The women from the bride's quarters received the guests. The pipers and the band started roaring. Rockets, fireworks and all manner of other explosives almost sounded war-like. Every available type of fireworks was on display. The welcoming of guests went on till the last of the fireworks was set alight. In between, women on both sides kept up a veritable downpour of songs.

The bridegroom's people stepped into the pandal. Clusters of red coconut, areca and banana were gleaming everywhere in the pandal which had been erected such that it covered the first floor too. All the pillars were decorated with mango and palm leaves and the hall was fully furnished with cushions and carpets. The tall mantapa was beautified with pictures. The lawyer had brought people from Udupi to build the mantapa. From Udupi had come the music troupe of Krishni as well. Wasn't the first salutation of the troupe for the master of the bridegroom's party, Rama Aithala? For the first time in his life, he got the *'daulatzada.'* Lost in all that grandeur, Lachcha reached the dhara mantapa where the rituals would take place. There was fire belching out smoke and there were fans for people sitting in front. Scented water was sprinkled on them. Drinks sweetened with sugar were given in silver tumblers. Narayanayya, a member of the family and a leader in the village, had taken charge of the wedding arrangements.

The women started singing *'Janakarayananthé, Mithilapuravanthé.'* Things stood still for a moment. A great clap of thunder stopped the priests from chanting mantras. The smoke emanating from the mantapa overcame the smoke

from the incense sticks in the pandal. Wind rose and filled the pandal with dust. Narayanayya came out to see what was happening. The sky was pitch dark. Lightning flashed without pause. Aithala sitting in the gathering prayed to God to allow things to go on smoothly. Narayanayya came straight to him and whispered in his ear. 'It may rain. Start giving dakshiné. I don't think anything will come in the way of dharé. There is a covered roof upstairs. But if the rain becomes heavier, people who have come to the wedding shouldn't go empty-handed and without blessing the couple.' Chanting went on in the mantapa with the speed of wind. When the lawyer held up the bride before the screen hung between the bride and the bridegroom, the pattering of rain was heard. Lachcha was garlanded as well. He too garlanded the girl with great zest.

As Aithala held a plate with coins, offering dakshiné to everyone, he saw the dharé performed and said there was no need to worry. That day he didn't give people a dakshiné of two annas as usual but three annas for every household. He paid four annas to the rich families. By the time people complimented him saying he had put every other household to shame, the marriage pandal had turned into a field full of flood water. What had to be done did go on in the mantapa. The rest got into some house on the other, into cowsheds and verandahs, standing for an hour and trembling all the while.

Though Sarasothi was half-drenched, she stood with Parothi, next to Lachcha, rejoicing in the grandeur of the wedding. She turned to Parothi. 'Parothi, it looks as if rain, a lot of it, is prominent in Anna's horoscope,' she said. Parothi remembered the day of her wedding. 'God willed so then; He has willed it so even now,' she said.

When Lachcha and Nagaveni stood up after the rituals, rain had stopped completely. The gathering grew large. By the time Aithala returned to Kodi, it was midnight. The moonlight smiled at the people who were returning.

The four days of the wedding were spent in great joy and the couple returned home and the house looked full. It was only after the wedding that Aithala started talking to his son in a cordial manner.

The holidays would be over in a fortnight. If Lachcha wanted to join college, there were still four more days left. What could he do till then apart from wandering from one river bank to the other? Once he took Nagaveni to his grandfather's house as the old man had not been able to attend the wedding. Until then all Lachcha's brave efforts to talk to her had been futile. She was a bundle of shyness and would always sit with the womenfolk. She would join her husband only for aarathi and akshathé. Then they would steal a look at each other. He had an intense desire to talk to her. Nagaveni was totally without speech as if she was dumb. If he looked for a moment to talk to her when no one was around, it didn't come. His brother-in-law would always appear out of nowhere to curb his enthusiasm.

The journey to the grandfather's house proved extremely convenient for Lachcha. He took his wife, got into a boat and sailed towards Thonsé. Thereafter, until he reached home, there was no fear of anyone finding fault if he talked to her. So, as soon as the boat left the edge of the land, he smiled at Nagaveni. She too smiled as she bent her head. 'Are you dumb?' he asked. 'And you?' she asked in return. By the time they reached the banks of Thonsé, she had become a veritable chatterbox. She too had an intense desire to talk to him. But, in front of others, her neck wouldn't stand straight nor would her tongue move.

Lachcha was very well looked after in his grandfather's house. The grandson's wife too became worthy of their affection. Madappayya felt sad for his dead wife saying that she didn't have the good fortune of seeing them. Lachcha and Nagaveni stayed there for four days at the old man's insistence. The young ones used that as a pretext to enjoy the freedom they had gained. Aithala called them for the feast he had arranged to felicitate the couple and they had no choice but to return. After coming back, Nagaveni stopped talking altogether, yet again.

However, Lachcha tried hard to take her to the beach after the people who had come for the feast had left. He called his brother-in-law Sadashiva to go to the sea with him. Who

else should go with them? Lachcha whispered in his ear that he should ask his sister to come. The messenger was successful. Nagaveni left home talking to her brother. Lachcha had gone earlier and was sitting on the beach waiting for them. But weren't the people of Kodi blessed with eyes? The news reached home. 'What are you doing, child? Wandering around with your wife just eight days after the wedding! What will people say?' Sarasothi asked Lachcha. Aithala was angry. 'Children nowadays are shameless. I didn't talk to Parothi for a whole year after she came home.'

There was rain and wind and the heat of Vaishakha cooled down. The lawyer got ready to go back home with his family. Sadashiva came to Aithala one day and said that his father wanted Lakshminarayana also to go with them. Lachcha too was waiting for the same sweet moment. Aithala went with Sadashiva to see the father. There it was decided that Lachcha would stay with his father-in-law and study in Mangalore. Other things could be discussed after he had completed F.A. A burden was taken off Aithala. 'The boy is not all that bright. You are his parents. Please advise him if he does anything wrong,' said Aithala. The lawyer smiled and said that he was indeed concerned with the welfare of his own daughter. Rama Aithala looked glum. He was a little apprehensive about his son maintaining his honour.

So, Lachcha went again to his grandfather's. Madappayya hugged him. 'Lachcha, you have acquired an alliance with a good family You are grown up now. Your family is honourable. Do you understand? Give up your childish pranks, be sensible and bring a good name to your family.... I don't know whether I will be around when you come again,' he said, bidding farewell.

His words were only too true. Lachcha went to Mangalore. The rainy season grew more vigorous. The deafening roar of the sea continued day and night without a pause. The coconut trees of the village swung and swayed enough to shatter themselves to bits. The estuary brought forth red mud and spewed it into the sea. In the relentless rain, Madappayya took to bed with pneumonia. His cold and

phlegm increased. Within a week of fever, his sojourn in the world was over. Sathya, Subbi with her child and Aithala were all there by his bed during his last moments. Madappayya's son appeared to be an orphan then.

Within a week of Lachcha's joining college, the letter informing him about the death of his grandfather was received. Lachcha felt that his ties with Padumunnooru had been cut. His uncle was there but he did not really care a lot about Lachcha.

A month had not passed after that when Lachcha received a letter from Aithala. 'Your mother, Parothi, has been bedridden lately and she is longing to see you. If you have holidays during Navarathri, come home. Things don't look serious enough for you to come home right now.' For that moment at least, Parothi's love for him came to his mind. Just three days later, he had to get back home. There was a telegram from home. By the time he reached home in a jutka, Parothi's days had ended.

At the moment of her death, Aithala, Sathya and Sarasothi were attending to her. Aithala wept thinking of the many harsh words he had spoken to her. 'How much you must have suffered because of me,' he said. Though very weak, she was conscious till the end. 'You shouldn't say such things. If you hadn't brought Sathya home, who would have performed death ceremonies for me?' The very next moment, she asked if Lachcha had arrived. 'He may come,' came the answer. Sarasothi saw her breathing hard. 'Parothi, shall I put some water into your mouth? Do you have strength enough to say "Narayana"? Will you say it?' Parothi gazed at Sarasothi. 'I shall... If my tongue doesn't have the strength, you whisper in my ears.' Still, she seemed to be longing for something. 'What? Is there anything you....' Sarasothi asked. 'No, not really. Was it Lachcha? No! Will he keep my head on his lap?' Parothi asked in a failing voice. Sathyabhamé was standing right in front of her. Aithala was chanting in the puja room. Then Sathyabhamé felt troubled, thinking how much Parothi must have been hurt because of her but had suffered in

silence. She ran sobbing to her husband. 'Please come over. Her time has almost run out. Akka desires to place her head on your lap.'

Aithala's voice shook as he chanted. He ran to Parothi. By then, her tongue had fallen silent and her breathing was hard. But she could see very well with wide open eyes the face of Aithala who had raised her head and placed it on his lap, even as he continued to chant "Narayana." Sarasothi poured the water of the Ganga into her mouth. Sathyabhamé sat at her feet. Peace spread over Parothi's face. The guileless smile on her lips proclaimed her contentment as if she wanted nothing more.

All that lasted but a moment. The next instant, the whole household began to weep. Sarasothi could not even do that. She clutched at the pain in her gut and held it there. She felt that she had no reason to live on after her companion.

The neighbours arrived. 'What a good soul!' said everyone who came. As the axe fell on wood, Lachcha arrived breathless from Mangalore. He heard the weeping even before he entered the house. He too wept for not having been able to see her while she was still alive.

For the next thirteen days, Lachcha was a witness to intense grief. Stepping into the verandah, going to the tank, seeing the huruli field or going into the clump of honné trees. Parothi's image hovered in front of his eyes as it did for everyone else.

~16~

Lachcha had gone back to Mangalore and was involved in his F.A. studies. In the new surroundings, in his joy at having grown up, he would get angry if someone called him Lachcha. He had to be addressed as Lakshminarayana. However, his brother-in-law still retained the freedom to call him Lachcha.

The hospitality in his father-in-law's house appealed a great deal to Lachcha. His brother-in-law was also quite refined. He could talk well and there was no end to his pranks. Lachcha was not bothered as long as they didn't hurt him. But, if he was ridiculed even a little, he would pounce like a tiger. Sadashiva knew the secret and would look for the right time to tease him. If Lachcha got angry on being teased, Sadashiva would run in to tell his sister that her husband was calling her. Nagaveni would come saying, 'It seems you called me.' She would smile and talk to him and his reddened face would get all twisted. That was another opportunity for Sadashiva to laugh.

Nagaveni's companionship turned out to be very pleasant. Lachcha was in his father-in-law's house. Being a big lawyer, his father-in-law's name carried weight and Lachcha couldn't shout about things as he did at Kittu Upadhyaya's place. He could not live here as he did there. Moreover, he couldn't ignore his father-in-law. Whether he liked it or not, he stayed there as a son-in-law and so he had to stay quiet like a cat. There was no opportunity to wander around as he liked or have fun playing cards. In the beginning, it seemed tough. He felt he could not stay under an obligation to his father-in-law. It would be better to stay by himself in a hotel. But that would mean forsaking Nagaveni's companionship and staying far away. He needed her to admire his cleverness, to chat with during free time and to be taught school lessons by him because he was intelligent. Sadashiva was sharper and more intelligent than Lachcha. They were studying in the same class. But

Nagaveni was still in the first form. She had to depend on someone else to find out what she didn't know. She would go to her husband. If she didn't do so on her own, Lachcha would go to her and ask, 'Have you studied today? Is there anything you want to ask?' On such occasions he would make sure that Sadashiva wasn't around. If he was, he would taunt the girl saying, 'Eh, Nagaveni, what does your husband know that you should ask him? Come here, I'll tell you.'

For two years, the stay in his father-in-law's house was for Lachcha a kind of living in a narrow cage. When he saw hotels, he would feel like stepping into them. He was afraid to put his hands into his pockets. Sadashiva would be around to prevent him fleecing his father-in-law under false pretences. He would get just as much money as he needed. When that was so, how could he have some to spare on hotels?

His second year's study was over as well. As he was leaving for home, he asked Nagaveni if she would go with him. She agreed to but wanted him to ask her father. Lachcha was scared. He knew that his father-in-law too was going home during the holidays. What was Lachcha's hurry, he might ask. So, the day he left his father-in-law's place, he sat with a frown on his face. Nagaveni was upset as well. She went to her father and asked softly, 'Appa, who knows when you will go home? May I go with him?'

'No, child,' said Vasudevayya, 'You will go with me.'

There was no opportunity to ask why. The lawyer told his daughter, 'His father won't approve of your going with him. They are all old-fashioned. Once the marriage is consummated, at home during the holidays, you can do what you want.' Nagaveni realised that she had grown up and kept quiet. So, when Lachcha left, he said, 'You want your father, not me. Isn't that so?' He left after making her cry. She was deeply hurt. The very next day, she wrote to her husband giving him the reason for not going with him.

Within a week, the lawyer's family reached their own village. Lachcha spent his solitary life in a room yet again. He was thrilled by the news of his father-in-law's family's arrival

in the village and ran there. Sadashiva had heard about what had happened from his sister. So, instead of welcoming his brother-in-law, he made fun of him, asking him if his anger had cooled.

Holidays and the result came as well. Sadashiva had secured a first class in the F.A. examination and Lachcha had passed with a second class. The news reached Kodi and Rama Aithala was very happy. He came to the lawyer's house. 'It is thanks to your kindness.and the boy's good fortune in having married your daughter,' he said. Lachcha was there as well. He didn't like such talk. However, he had no courage to say anything before his father. Meanwhile, the elders began talking about Lachcha's nuptials. Aithala said it could take place during the holidays. Who knew where he had to go for further studies? 'They are children of today, they shouldn't go astray,' he said.

Lachcha was extremely happy during the holidays. He would go to the edge of the river everyday. 'Lachcha,' said Sarasothi, 'Why don't you bring Nagaveni here and spend a couple of pleasant days? Shouldn't we see the two of you being happy together?'

'She is a lawyer's daughter. She doesn't lack food, drinks and care there. What if you make her wash dishes as soon as she comes here?' Lachcha asked.

Sarasothi laughed. 'You ask your mother how much work we asked her to do when she came here first. She started to work on her own. We never asked her to do anything. Tell us what else your wife wants. We shall do it. It is not right that she spend three-hundred-and-sixty-five days with her father.'

Her words didn't get implanted in Lachcha's mind. So, she thought they were better said by Rama Aithala. Instead of telling Lachcha, he told the lawyer when he went to his house that Nagaveni could spend a few days with them. Lachcha was nearby. 'Why a few days? Let her be there for a month,' the lawyer said, 'It is enough if she comes back before we return to Mangalore. Anyway, why should you ask us? She is your daughter-in-law after all.'

Nagaveni was very eager to find out what Lachcha's people were like. So, she followed her father-in-law and crossed the river that very day and came to Kodi.

Lachcha followed her. He wasn't very pleased about having lost out on the issue of bringing over his wife. But he kept quiet because his father was himself involved in the matter. Nagaveni didn't lack any kind of hospitality at her father-in-law's house. She would often offer to milk the cows or wipe the floor. Once she asked her mother-in-law, 'Atté, I haven't met Subbattigé. Could you please ask her to come over before I leave?' 'Your husband can fetch her,' suggested Sarasothi. She told Lachcha that she wanted to see his sister. 'She has two eyes and two feet just like you,' was Lachcha's reply. Nagaveni was a smart girl who had been to school. 'In that case, I don't need to see anyone with two eyes like me,' she said.

Lachcha had to travel to Mandarthi where his sister was. He didn't want to walk all the way. But what could he do? Nagaveni wouldn't agree to either Aithala or Sarasothi going. She didn't feel like suggesting it, considering their age. So, she started to pester her husband about going to Mandarthi. When Rama Aithala heard of it, he said, 'Sarasothi, inform boatman Govinda. As soon as the sun rises, let both Lachcha and Nagaveni go to Barakooru by boat. Then Govinda will take them to Mandarthi. Let them stay there for a few days as well. They can come back with Subbi and her child.' Lachcha was tongue-tied, as he had stayed with the lawyer for two years and was now hesitant to open his mouth.

The very next morning, both of them set off. Nagaveni, who had moved around only in Airodi and Mangalore, was very fond of travelling and eager to meet new people. Watching Lachcha's passivity, she said, 'You have seen everything. I love to see it all.' The early morning journey in the boat captivated her mind.

'Where can one find beauty in Mangalore? These islands, these gardens,' exclaimed Nagaveni in amazement. The boat reached Barakooru later in the morning. Govinda guided them

to the house of their relatives. Nagaveni kept on asking questions about what she saw, all the way. The ruins of temples, tanks and roads attracted her. Govinda broadcast what he knew of the history of the place. 'Don't be saucy.... What is so special about ruined temples?' said Lachcha, voicing the authority of a husband.

A few hours later, Lachcha reached the house of his Mandarthi brother-in-law, accompanied by his wife. It was as if the Paryaya of Udupi itself was taking place in that house. His brother-in-law, who had seen and heard of Lachcha's past behaviour, was thrilled at his decision to visit them. The members of the family looked after Nagaveni, offering her uncommon hospitality. They couldn't leave even after three of four days. In addition, the Dasha Avatara temple troupe had arrived in Mandarthi. They were going to enact the last show before they closed down. Nagaveni had seen outdoor folk-plays when she was very young. She had a desire to see one again. One night, she watched it with unblinking attention, along with her husband, sister-in-law and brother-in-law.

Nagaveni lost herself in the beauty of the place, looking at the forest, hills and monkeys. They stayed there for six days after which they returned to Kodi. Along with them came Subbi and her four-year old son, Sanna.

Sarasothi and Sathyabhamé were happy that day. It appeared as if God had granted Lachcha some goodness. Sarasothi cried, wishing Parothi were alive at that time.

The May holiday blew away like the wind. When rainy days awakened, June stepped in. The lawyer was to go to Mangalore and Lachcha would go too, for further studies. He didn't know what Nagaveni would do. 'She is growing up,' said Aithala, 'How long can she stay in her father's house? Don't we have the means to look after her? Earlier, it was all right. But now, even the nuptials are over.' That made it almost certain that Lachcha's further education would not continue in Mangalore. The lawyer had decided to send him to Madras and Aithala had agreed as well. It seemed as if Aithala's hopes which had faded and bitten the dust had risen again. Lachcha

could visualise himself as a renowned lawyer. But he had one worry about Nagaveni's future. He would have to stay away from her but he did want her to stay in Mangalore with her father and finish her third form. Aithala said that there was no reason on earth for girls to learn English. Sarasothi barged in to say that Nagaveni had missed her periods that month. Anyhow, the decision was stalled instead of taking shape. The lawyer wanted Nagaveni to be sent to Mangalore. Aithala agreed to do so.

Those who wanted to study for B.A. had one more month of holidays. Lachcha wanted to spend it in Mangalore. So, he joined his father-in-law at the time of his departure. He warned his father before he left. 'Don't make me look to my father-in-law for the smallest paisa. There is a lot of expenditure for B.A. Moreover, my father-in-law has to bear the burden of Sadashiva, remember.' Aithala had never taken advice from younger people. So he said that education wouldn't be ruined without money. Lachcha was hurt that his father still had no respect for him.

The fair at Aithala's house had ended. Lachcha and Nagaveni went to Mangalore. The daughter and grandson too went away. Only three people remained in the house yet again. 'What's this? It appears as if only three people are permanent in this house,' joked Sarasothi.

Rama Aithala had to give up visiting far off places for his priestly work. 'I can neither cross the river nor walk any more. Who will kill himself walking great distances at this age?' he started saying. If he got too bored staying at home, he would tell Sathya, 'I can't stay home without any work and it is getting difficult to work in the field as well. It is cultivation just for name's sake. Anyway, I shall go to Mandarthi because of our son-in-law's insistence.' There his son-in-law's father had become an old man. It was very pleasant to talk with him, as they both sat with their backs against two pillars. Aithala loved placing his grandson on his lap and fondling him. In the joy of her father's visit, housework became light as a flower for Subbi. Gradually, it became a habit for Aithala to spend at least four days in a month at Mandarthi. Once in a while, his grandson would join him on his way back to Kodi.

'What more is there for me? I am ready to leave when the call comes from over there,' Aithala started saying often. But one longing he had in his heart didn't disappear at all. It had been there ever since Sheena Mayya's tiled house rose amidst their dwellings. But the number of those who had tiled houses after making money in Bangalore was increasing. If one surveyed the houses from Kodi to Manooru, at least half a dozen such houses could be seen. Subraya Upadhyaya had tiled his house as well. Rama Aithala was still bothered by his unfulfilled longing. Everytime he talked about the village, the issue of tiled houses cropped up. 'Anna is obsessed with a tiled house. Won't death arrive if the house is tiled?' She knew he was ageing and he shouldn't die with a desire unfulfilled. 'Anna, don't think I am against it. If you want to tile the house, do so. But I think of one thing only. Who will stay in this house tomorrow? Will Lachcha ever stay here?'

'No, he won't. I know that. But we can see the house before we die. If someone says this was Rama Aithala's house at least for a few days after my death, it's enough for me,' he replied. Sarasothi realised how strong his desire was. So, she started asking on her own what needed to be done. Even permission was given to choose any carpenter except Hanumachari who had encouraged the axing of the jackfruit tree. 'After this rainy season is over, erect strong stone pillars and build the house. When you build it, let it not be a cheap house. Build a strong, storeyed house,' she said. Once in a while, Aithala would get suspicious. 'Tell me if you are not keen on it. Don't tease me,' he would say. She felt hurt. 'I am not mocking. I'm thinking of something else altogether. After you, who will have all this? Eventually, if you were to think a little, you would realise that if you left behind any cash, Lachcha will not leave a paisa unspent. That's why, let some money be spent on the house. What remains after that may be spent on another property or some gold for the daughter-in-law. If you feel like it, you can also have some jewellery made for Subbi. After all, she is your flesh and blood.' Sathyabhamé was quite enthusiastic about having gold ornaments made for her daughter.

Aithala realised the truth of such sentiments. He started work on his new house soon. He also started looking for property in accordance with his sister's advice. He knew full well that Lachcha would not take more than three days to run through any cash left behind. And so, jewellery worth five hundred rupees each was made for his daughter and daughter-in-law. Meanwhile, demands from Lachcha for rupees forty to fifty every month started arriving from Madras. Aithala went to a lawyer whom he knew well in Kundapura to find out how much money would be needed per month to live in Madras. But he had doubts once in a while whether Lachcha was collecting money, as before, from his father-in-law as well.

For the past two or three months, Lachcha would write to his father every month, at least to ask for money. He would write a few more letters if the arrival of the money was delayed. That was why, since Aithala didn't know how to write, he caught hold of a friend and got a letter written to Mangalore. But there was no reply from there. Even the second letter received no reply and Aithala was very upset. 'Never mind, I'll pay the penalty for as long as I need to. After that, it will be in line with what is written on his forehead,' he decided, and started sending money.

All his thoughts were now concentrated on the house. So, he had less free time now. The structure of the house kept changing everyday. Sometimes he would wonder whether it should have a first floor or not. However, work went on according to his latest idea. 'So, Aithala too has started building a house. But who will stay in it? He is like an old log of wood. The son is not one to be relied upon,' Sheena Mayya began his ridicule. 'That's in his nature. Why do you bother about all that?' Sarasothi had to console her brother.

By the time tiles were being laid on the roof, Yugadi arrived. Very soon, by Chaithra, mortar work on walls would be completed. Housewarming had to be performed in a grand manner. Lachcha's father-in-law's family had to be invited. When May holidays started, Lachcha arrived from Madras as well. 'Why did you come alone? Why didn't you bring Nagaveni? Shouldn't she be here for the housewarming? When will the

lawyer arrive home? How is your brother-in-law?' Lachcha did not give any convincing answer to Aithala's questions. 'What's this, Sarasothi? He has come alone!' complained Aithala. Sarasothi answered that Nagaveni's pregnancy might be quite advanced. In whatever manner she tried, Sarasothi's efforts to get an answer from Lachcha proved futile. During the previous holiday, there had been such joy in him, but now, there seemed to be an equal measure of ennui. Once Aithala asked him how he liked the house and whether he thought it was big enough or not. Pat came the answer. 'Don't you want to know who will be living here in the future?' As if that was not enough, he criticised his father while talking to Sarasothi. 'He won't send me even ten rupees more when I ask for it. Here, why should he spend piles and piles of money on building such a big house? Is this a market or a town? When you don't need this house, it won't raise even a paisa of rent here.' He thought only of himself; he wasn't bothered about others.

Sarasothi pretended not to have heard what he said about the building but brought up something else. 'Why? Wasn't the lawyer sending you money?'

'He has his own children. How much money can he send me?'

'Child, I'll make sure that you will have no trouble next year.'

The house was ready to be occupied. A letter was sent to the lawyer insisting on his coming. Even that didn't fetch a reply. 'Lachcha,' said Aithala, 'Is Nagaveni advanced in pregnancy? If so, why doesn't he write about it?' Eventually, not knowing what else he could do, he asked Lachcha to go and bring her. 'I can't,' said the boy. 'Didn't I ask him to send her with me when I came?'

Aithala was alarmed to hear that she hadn't been sent even after having been asked. Had there been a fight between father-in-law and son-in-law? Perhaps so. Otherwise, what was the reason for not sending Lachcha's wife with him? She had stayed on at her father's for a long time. She was a good girl as well and had never been indifferent towards her mother-in-

law's household. Unable to think of any explanation, he went straight to Airodi. He reached Narayanappa's house and opened his heart to him. Narayanappa didn't say much, 'Aithalaré, you can have your son married again. Anna has totally lost his love for his son-in-law,' he said.

Aithala was shocked. 'Did my son do something wrong? We haven't been told anything at all. So, how can you inform us of such a decision all of a sudden? Narayanappa, tell me if the mistake is mine or Lachcha's. I shall teach him a lesson.' With no way out, Narayanappa had to reveal a family secret. 'We had suspected that your daughter-in-law was pregnant when she left here. We were all happy. But, within a couple of months of her going to Mangalore, she started suffering from all sorts of ailments. She lost the child. However, she has still not recovered. Eventually, she had to be seen by a doctor. We are told that she has to suffer all through her life because of the diseases your son had contracted.' Aithala bent his head. A thunderbolt had struck him from a place he hadn't dreamt of.

There was nothing more to be said. 'Ayyo, my son! What else do I need to see before I die?' Aithala thought and returned home. Lachcha the Great, too, was at home. Aithala, like one who has lost his senses, went to beat him up in front of everyone. 'It wouldn't have mattered if you had destroyed yourself. But you have destroyed the life of that innocent girl,' he said in anger. Lachcha walked away, furious, to Sheena Mayya's house. 'Don't be afraid, Lachcha. I hate your father but not you. If your father hesitates to give you money for your studies, I shall give it to you. You may give it back when your studies are over,' said Sheena Mayya, fuelling the hatred between father and son. Sarasothi tried over and over again to bring Lachcha back from Sheena Mayya's house. Sathyabhamé wept all day long, but Lachcha wouldn't budge from there. He had just one answer. 'They listened to unfair talk from whoever said it, and dishonoured me.' But this time, Sarasothi was not to be taken in by his lies and deceit.

So, Aithala's housewarming took place without his son. This helped Sheena Mayya no end to mock Aithala. What

might have been the outcome had Lachcha's history come out into the open! But he had gone behind a screen of hatred in order to hide his own shame. He had won, he thought, and was joyful. He took the money he needed for the whole year in June itself and left for Madras.

Nagaveni's life had been eclipsed. She had spent a very pleasant time with her husband. When he left for Madras, she had told him that he should come home during the holidays in December. After that, she had only written a couple of letters to him. 'I am sick and suffering pain,' said one letter. 'Having lost the chance of becoming a mother, I myself am like a diseased dog,' she said in another. Later, when she heard the doctor's orders, she was even more worried, she wrote. The pain that Vasudevayya felt for his daughter could not be expressed. Scared of his son-in-law, he kept his daughter away from him. However, he sent money to him for four months. Eventually, Lachcha wrote an angry letter saying that he didn't want to be obliged to his father-in-law for anything. His brother-in-law, Sadashiva, heard about everything and took him to task. As a result, Lachcha started hating everyone in the family. Finally even Nagaveni started feeling that he was an animal come to ruin her life.

Now, six months later, Nagaveni was well. However, her face hadn't regained its radiance. She spent the whole day lost in thought. Once in a while, she would think of all that she had gone through. She had no other resource but Lachcha. Her father had sons and she would be a burden on them if she stayed on. She even thought she would write and ask for forgiveness from everyone. Meanwhile, a letter came from Airodi for her father. Narayanappa informed them about Aithala's visit during the previous holidays and his aloofness from his son. 'Now the boy is lost for good,' said Vasudevayya. His wife joined him in his grief. At that time, the only one staring speechlessly at the sky was Nagaveni.

Lachcha! He was showing off with his borrowed money. He didn't even hesitate to write to his father once in a while, jeering at him. The ageing Aithala found it intolerable. He had a letter written to lawyer Vasudevayya. 'Your daughter seems

to have fallen by the wayside because of my misfortune. Weren't you strong enough to bring him around to the right path? Never mind. What God wills comes to pass. But I want to tell you something. If you so desire, I shall look after my daughter-in-law at home in such a way that she will lack nothing. Most of my property is self-earned. Now that I have no desire to see my son's face, will you please grant me the good fortune of seeing my daughter-in-law's face?' he pleaded.

The lawyer came to his village with his daughter during the Christmas holidays. The very next day, he took her to Aithala. In great pain and with hesitation, Aithala received them and Attended to the lawyer's comfort. 'Please look at this storeyed house, this cowshed and this courtyard. Who will have all these? My moment has come.' Sathyabhamé came and stood beside him. She was tearful at the sight of her daughter-in-law. 'You have arrived, my child!' she said to Nagaveni who greeted her in return. 'Your daughter-in-law is here. You may keep her if you wish. But there is no use crying over your son,' said Vasudevayya.

'Whatever is fated will happen. Three quarters of what I have is self-earned. I shall leave it in the name of my daughter-in-law. I shall give a little to our Subbi. I shall not touch a bit of what my father left me. Lachcha can eat it away or sell it. Let him have fun pulling out the tiles from this house,' said Aithala.

The lawyer spent the whole of that day at Aithala's. When her father left, Nagaveni said she would stay on there for a few days. Her father left the house, his eyes filled with tears.

Now, Nagaveni became Aithala's son. Though she had been to school and was the daughter of a rich man, she was very unassuming. Sarasothi and Sathyabhamé consoled her every minute. 'Who can erase what Brahma has written? Why don't you look at me?' said Sarasothi. Nagaveni started believing that she was just one among all other sad women.

Aithala's last outing was the fair at Saligrama after Makara Sankranthi. They had all gone to the temple of their

family God, Narasimha. Aithala had begged Him to grant a little goodness to Lachcha. On his return from the fair, Aithala took to bed with fever. A month passed. The fever was low, but one could see that Aithala's body was shrinking with it. April came and Lachcha arrived home after completing his B.A. Even after learning that his father was bedridden, he did not visit him but stayed with Sheena Mayya. Sarasothi offered to bring him home.'I have no desire to see him,' said Aithala. If Lachcha had stayed somewhere else, Aithala would have given him a few words of wisdom at least in his dying moments. This was what he felt deep inside. He didn't have the desire to say those words to someone who had joined Sheena Mayya's camp.

Chaithra Bahula Amavasyé, the new moon day. Aithala's house was enveloped in darkness. That morning, Sarasothi, Sathya and Nagaveni took turns to bathe in the sea. Of late, looking after her father-in-law was what Nagaveni liked best. He was like an infant. That particular new moon day, his body was very hot. He would lose consciousness at times. Nagaveni looked at him and asked tearfully if she could call her husband. The tears of his daughter-in-law melted the heart of the old man. 'Will he come if you call him? You have Sheena Mayya there who is much older than you,' he said. Nagaveni kept quiet.

Meanwhile, the news that Rama Aithala was very sick spread among the people who had come for their Amavasyé dip in the sea. Many who came for a bath went to see him. 'How will he survive this day? If it passes, he can live for another four years,' said Subraya Upadhyaya. The news reached Sheena Mayya as well. His mind was in a turmoil. Deciding that however troublesome Aithala might have been in the past, one shouldn't stay away at the time of death, Sheena Mayya went home, turned back, and stepped into Aithala's house. When Aithala opened his eyes in one of his conscious states, Sheena Mayya was standing in front of him. 'Who is this? Sheena?' he asked. 'Yes, Aithala,' came the reply. 'After I die, will you forget my enmity and advise my son a little?' asked Aithala. Sheena Mayya became like a child. 'Please

forgive me for whatever I have said and done,' said Sheena, clutching Aithala's feet and weeping. Whatever he had been before this, whatever he would become after this, at this moment he was honest as he faced Aithala's death. The two faces which had spewed hatred for a long time looked at each other with friendliness.

Nagaveni ran to tell this to Sarasothi, who took her to Sheena's house. Only Nagaveni stepped into the house. Lachcha was sitting by the main door. Looking at Nagaveni, he wondered how she had arrived there. He saw her tear-drenched cheeks and asked what the matter was. 'Won't you come and see your father before he dies?' she asked. Lachcha followed her and Sarasothi back home. He did not have the courage to go through the door. Nagaveni went to her father-in-law. 'He has come. May he come in? Please don't get angry.' she said. 'My child,' Aithala said, 'After seeing you.... How can I get angry in the presence of a goddess like you?'

Nagaveni came sobbing to the door. Holding her husband by the hand, she took him to Aithala. Lachcha was alarmed and his face went pale when he saw Sheena Mayya. 'Lachchanna, touch his feet,' said Sheena, 'We do not want any enmity with him. It's enough. God won't bless us otherwise.' Lachcha collapsed like so much slush.

All through the night, Aithala was half-conscious. Navagrahadana, Godana and Bhoodana were done when he was conscious. 'I don't have the strength to advise you. Look after your wife in an honourable manner. I have left all my property in her name since I couldn't rely on you,' Aithala said. Lachchanna was speechless as he stood there listening to everything.

Aithala passed away before Amavasyé was over. Sarasothi's spirit, which was half-broken when Parothi died, was now totally snuffed out. People spread the news, and Subbi came rushing. The obsequies had to be completed. Sheena Mayya himself lent his shoulder to carry Aithala's body. Even his staunch enemies were consoled when they saw that. The only one who didn't shed a tear that day was Sarasothi, as the

spring of her tears had dried up the way her speech had over the recent past. From then on, she went around for many days with lips sealed like someone who had been forbidden to talk. Listening to his mother, sister and wife wailing at home, Lachcha too felt philosophically that life was hell, and that for every pleasure, there were ten sorrows. But it was like the proverbial thought of renunciation that comes when one is in a graveyard. When his sister and other close relatives who had come went back after the obsequies, he began to forget about his father's death. It was true that his house looked as if it was enveloped in darkness but he didn't feel like going back to Sheena Mayya's. It seemed to him that the very man who had encouraged the hatred between his father and himself had insulted him before his father. But was there any joy left in the house at least? There was no enthusiasm in talking to Nagaveni as before. She was like a stranger to him. The hatred that had grown in him against her father had turned against her as well, it appeared. Nagaveni was a young girl who could not picture her future. Many a time, she talked to him as if she had forgotten the injustice that was done to her. But the very next moment, she would turn gloomy thinking that she might experience the same hellish pain again because of her trusting nature. Whenever Sarasothi or Sathyabhamé saw her face, they would wince in pain, thinking of Lachcha's despicable behaviour.

Lachcha had learnt to seek his pleasure and satisfaction outside the house. He knew that Kittu Upadhyaya had come home. So, he started lying in wait, seeking Jalaja's love.

The results of the B.A. examination came, and with it, the joy of having passed. What next was the big question. It was impossible for him to live in the village, which was for him a hell. Should he study further or look for a job? He could see no clear direction. 'Amma,' he said after his final decision, 'You can all stay at home. Appa has left you everything in his will. I don't think that any respect for me remains in this house. I cannot stay here begging for alms from Nagaveni. Moreover, what have I gained after passing B.A.? There is nothing I can do here after my studies. I shall

go somewhere and look for a job.' The future of the household looked even darker to Sarasothi. She called Nagaveni and asked her what she would like to do. 'What does she lack? Over there, she has her father, a rich lawyer. Over here, she has enough for her meals,' said Lachcha in a harsh manner and went to Sheena Mayya for a loan. 'Why do you need a loan now? Aren't you the master of the house?' Sheena Mayya asked. Lachcha told him about the arrangements his father had made at the time of his death. 'He couldn't do anything with the property he had inherited and so he has let it be. Otherwise, I would have had to go begging. The only property I have is what my grandfather has left behind.' Sheena Mayya didn't approve of Lachcha living away from his wife. But Lachcha had only one answer. 'If you can, give me a small loan, considering my sense of responsibility. I will have to spend time somehow till I find a job. I don't want to be under her obligation,' he said and went away.

Seeing that there were no men left in Aithala's house in Kodi, Narayanappa used to come from Airodi once in a while.

'What are you going to do? What should Nagaveni do? I have no objection to her staying with us,' he said.

'Nothing will happen. Nothing needs to happen either. I may last for a few days more. I was born here and I shall die here as well,' Sarasothi said. Sathyabhamé wanted to go to her brother's house but changed her mind the next minute. She said, 'Let Nagaveni stay with her father. She grew up happily there. She suffered a lot because of her husband. Let her not suffer more living here in loneliness.'

When Narayanappa suggested taking Nagaveni home, she wouldn't hear of it. After having seen Sarasothi's friendliness and temperament for a few days, she thought it would be wrong to abandon her in such circumstances. Her father-in-law's house was filled with Sarasothi's unusual energy and Nagaveni had developed a unique reverence towards it.

Narayanappa had to return home disappointed. Hearing the news of his nephew having left home without giving any

information, Janardana, son of Padumunnooru Madappayya, came to invite his sister. 'Let her be with us for a year,' he said, and took her away. Sarasothi asked Nagaveni, 'Why do you stay back here, trusting me?' Nagaveni shed tears. 'Shouldn't I stay here to fulfil my obligation to my father-in-law? If my husband becomes a good man and takes me, I shall go. If he does so, let him ask both of us to join him. I shall stay here as long as you do....'

Nagaveni was young. Hers was not a life filled with experience. It was one of emotions. Pity had sprung up in her heart and made her speak such words. Sarasothi became the mistress of the household, swept the floor and lit the lamps while Nagaveni cooked. Now they were unnconcerned about cultivation, the cucumber in the backyard, or any such thing. 'Why this pain? Let those who have eaten, continue to eat. Until God calls, we shall spend our days chanting His name,' they both decided.

Within six months, Nagaveni received a letter from her father. It said that her husband was in Ballari in a government job. He had no further information. Who gained anything by that?

For Nagaveni, it was a time for meditation. *'Namah Shivaya,'* taught her by Sarasothi, and the prayer-beads, became her tools for spending time. If she felt very bored, she would visit her uncle in Airodi. At home, she would be trouble-free, thanks to the income from the land bequeathed by her father-in-law. If there was any problem, Narayanappa would come and collect the lease money. 'Give the money here, put the money there,' and so on, her father would advise her from Mangalore. The management of the property in Lachcha's name was looked after by Sheena Mayya. There was no way they would have a claim over it.

* * *

It had been three years since Lachcha left home. It was three years later that he came back to visit his village. Even then, he didn't come straight home but went to stay with

Sheena Mayya. He came home once. The house appeared gloomy and so did the occupants. Nagaveni had just bathed and was coming back from the tank. She went quickly to the yard. She couldn't instantly recognise the person standing there.

The moustache on the person's face had grown. He was dressed as if he belonged elsewhere. Lachcha had arrived with all the grandeur of his new life.

'What? Can't you recognise me?' he asked. Nagaveni lifted her face. Would she not recognise the voice at least? A smile mixed with sadness appeared on her face. 'Why do you taunt me like that?' she asked. The next moment, she felt like crying. Lachcha sat in the verandah. Sarasothi came running.

'Child, you have come! When did you come? Where have you come from?' He felt ashamed to say when he had arrived. 'It doesn't matter if you forget the arms that carried you and played with you. But how can you give pain to the woman whose hand you have taken with fire as witness?' The memory of the words his father had spoken at the time of death in front of everyone shook him. He fell silent. Like the sun rising in pitch darkness, the whole house shone with smiles because of his arrival.

Nagaveni's beauty, now mature and radiant, spread like moonlight in Lachcha's eyes. He felt foolish for having gone away leaving this wealth of beauty behind. Though he followed them like a guest when they offered him meals and hospitality, he talked about himself after lunch. 'I am a supervisor now. I have a job far away from here in Ballari district. But it is very comfortable there. If I work well, I can even become a tax collector. Though the pay is not much, there are other profitable aspects to the job.' He described his circumstances.

Night fell. Meals were over. Nagaveni tried very hard to bring a youthful smile to her face. At the same time, Lachcha stepped out. When asked where he was going, he replied that he was going to Sheena Mayya's house because he had gone there when he arrived the day before, and that he should get back. 'Why? Can't you stay here? Isn't this house yours as well? Am I a stranger?' When Nagaveni spoke these last words, her speech was unsteady and her voice was shaking.

'I didn't know whether you wanted me or not. So I was leaving,' said Lachcha. 'You should never taunt your wife like that,' Nagaveni said.

It appeared as if Lachcha had reclaimed his power over her youth. Bound by her sense of morality and amity, she forgot everything else and let him share her bed. The intense hatred towards him was forgotten.

Lachcha stayed home till the holidays were over, walking around and talking happily with everyone. Nagaveni told him about the financial arrangements at home.

One day, all the fun and frolic came to an end. 'My leave is over. I must join duty in Ballari,' he announced. Sarasothi wanted him to stay on. 'If he wishes to leave, let him,' Nagaveni said. 'But let him take both of us with him. Uncle will look after money-collection here.' Lachcha thought for a bit. 'I shall fix up a house there and then take you both,' he said. It was agreed upon. Sarasothi wanted to get Nagaveni and Lachcha together under any pretext. But she herself was counting her days and minutes before she could merge with the soil.

~17~

Supervisor Lakshminarayana Raya's letters came from Ballari now and then. But Nagaveni's father himself wasn't aware what lay behind the broken relationship between his daughter and Lachcha. In every letter to her husband, Nagaveni would plead with him not to let them rot there. His aunt shouldn't be made to suffer in pain. He would write back to say that he was always on the move and was being transferred over and over again. To counter his hedging and his promise to come some time or the other, she wrote to say that he would be a father soon and that there was no need to make any arrangements right away.

Within six months, a letter from Lakshminarayana arrived from Kerala instead of Ballari. 'With the help of some friends, I have found the job of an inspector in the Excise Department. This is a much better job than the one I held in the Revenue Department. There is a lot of income in this. Moreover, some day I may even get transferred to our own district,' he wrote.

It was true that Lakshminarayana had gone to Kerala. It was also true that he had found a job there. But he didn't want to stay there. His desire to earn money was very strong. As a result, his eyes were always open, watching for the next step and the one after that. The department he had joined increased his income. He never shied away from accepting gifts or bribes that arrived from different quarters. But one could never tell how much he saved from his income. He spent as much as he earned and lived with greater pomp than his income would allow. His artful behaviour in the department raised the hope of promotion. Though it was true that he would not get it within a short time, there was the assurance that he would be promoted some time in the future.

But his extravagance did not give him any peace of mind. His excessive fondness for women bothered him all the time. However much he earned, he was always empty-handed because of this weakness. He thought of writing home for money. If he wrote that he didn't have much income and that what he had wasn't enough, wouldn't he give those at home an occasion to insult him again? And so, he wrote a letter home with great cunning. 'It is not profitable to give loans from your income at a low rate of interest. Here the interest rate is very high. So, as soon as you get the produce from the fields, sell the rice and send the money here.'

When the letter arrived, Nagaveni was resting in bed. She wasn't feeling very well. She was six months gone in pregnancy. The contents of the letter bewildered her. Narayanappa had already sold the produce and given loans to people in her name. What could she write in reply to her husband? Should she state the facts or tell her uncle everything and write according to his direction? Sarasothi enquired about

the letter. 'Is Lachcha coming here? Is there any news of his coming shortly?' she asked. But when she got to know what he had written, she said he was planning to get money from home merely to blow it up. Wasn't the fifty rupees he earned enough for him? Nagaveni could not so distrust her husband. She had to reply somehow. If she were to tell him that money had already been loaned out, he might taunt her saying that she was the mistress, after all, who had the courage to give loans without asking him. She wondered what to do and eventually, informed her uncle. He told her to write back saying that her uncle had given loans in her name because the interest rate was good, and that, apart from the rice needed for use at home, she had no cash left.

Before the letter could reach him, another came from Lachcha. 'Send at least five hundred rupees immediately. There is a client here who is prepared to pay compound interest on the amount. In our village, who is there prepared to pay more than six per cent interest?'

Nagaveni thought that what she had written in the first letter would suffice. But, within a month, letter after letter started coming. In one letter he wrote that he wasn't very well and two hundred rupees should be sent for medicines. Sarasothi did not trust him at all. But Nagaveni was scared. She went to her uncle and cried. 'Don't lead him into the wrong path yourself. If he no longer has any money, let him come home,' he said. Nevertheless, money reached him that time. Another letter came before the money could be spent. The reasons he gave were more or less the same as before. Nagaveni's uncle wrote back with words of advice. 'You come home as soon as possible. Treatment can be given here. Moreover, it is almost time for your wife to deliver the baby. Sarasothamma has grown old and can't do any work at all. Nagaveni does not leave her or the house to go anywhere else. Shouldn't there be one man at least, at a time like this?'

There was no reply for a long time. Lakshminarayana wasn't ill nor had anything else happened. There was just a desire to get money from home. 'This damned devil of a Narayanappa has come in the way of things; he hinders me

from spending the money earned by my father,' he thought. He was angry and stayed back in Kerala. On the other hand, the thought that he could write a few soothing words to Nagaveni at such a stressful time never occurred to him.

Nagaveni had now completed nine months of her pregnancy. Her uncle pressed her to come to his house, but she said no. She was determined to stay where her husband's aunt, their Atté was. Sarasothi was already old. On top of that, there was the grief caused by the death of her life companions. 'Child, what do you gain by relying upon me? It would have been better if at least Sathyabhamé were here,' she said sadly. She drove the servants to Padumunnooru. Sathyabhamé came rushing back from there. She saw her daughter-in-law's condition and felt that it was wrong to have left her alone for so long. Sarasothi was reassured. She told Nagaveni that God had sent Sathya at the right time. From the moment she arrived, Sathyabhamé wouldn't let her daughter-in-law do any housework. When she learnt of her son's letter, she told them never to mention his name to her.

The month of Phalguna arrived. Nagaveni started experiencing labour pains in the morning on full-moon day. Getting the information, Narayanappa's wife came hurrying down from Airodi. Nagaveni suffered intolerable pain the whole day, but her face was set as if she was ready to face any hardship. Sarasothi never left her side. Sathyabhamé kept moving between the kitchen and the delivery room. Whenever she saw Nagaveni's face tightly set in pain, her aunt would comfort her. 'Nagaveni seems to have no desire left for anything. Nor has there been any celebration of her pregnancy. Even her husband is not near during her difficult days.' These thoughts kept worrying her aunt. She knew there was fear in Nagaveni's mind about what might happen in future. Could the memory of her earlier pregnancy and the disappointment in its wake have vanished at that moment? She read the longing, disappointment and the pain in her 'daughter's' face. 'Child, why do you worry? God will look after you. It won't be like last time. God won't forsake you,' she said. Sarasothi didn't understand what the aunt meant by saying 'last time.'

The words sounded strange to her ears. 'What happened last time?' she asked. 'Please don't tell her!' screamed Nagaveni. Her aunt bit her tongue and Sarasothi's face turned pale. But, not wanting to speak anymore, the aunt fell silent but comforted the girl. 'Don't be scared, child. Nothing will happen. There is God. Our God, Narasimha, whom we have always trusted, will look after you.' Nagaveni had closed her eyes after screaming. She lost consciousness for a while. Everyone surrounded her. Eventually, they daubed her eyes with water and fanned her. The midwife, who was sitting in a corner, approached Nagaveni.

By midnight, all faces bloomed like the Evening jasmine. Nagaveni was lying down exhausted. It had been an hour since she had given birth to a male child. There had been no sound from her as yet. So, Sarasothi called her by name. The baby cried. Nagaveni's faced looked happy hearing the child cry. 'God,' she said. 'Yes,' said Sarasothi, 'God is great. He will never abandon you, no matter who else will.' As if she understood what those words meant, Nagaveni said in an inaudible voice, 'Don't say that. He may come home.'

The very next morning, a letter went to Kerala carrying the good news. The next day, a telegram was sent as well under Nagaveni's instruction. Though she was extremely weak, she felt happy looking at the baby, all pink and lying next to her, crying.

Six days passed. Everyone was sitting around her. Her aunt had gone to Airodi that very morning to check the situation there. Everyone had finished having lunch and the baby was asleep. Nagaveni was also lying down very peacefully. She saw the faces of the elders before her. 'That day I screamed,' she said softly.

'Yes, you did. It happens sometimes. Were you scared that day?' asked Sarasothi. 'I wasn't there. I heard you scream and came,' said Sathyabhamé, 'What did you see?'

'I didn't see anything. My aunt was about to say something and I was scared she would.'

'Yes. I thought I heard the words, "last time". What was it about?'

Nagaveni smiled. 'You don't know. This is the second time I am pregnant. Last time, within three months....' she broke down at the memory. Not able to understand anything, Sathyabhamé and Sarasothi looked at Nagaveni's face. 'Don't cry. God won't forsake you this time,' they said. The information was totally new to them. It seemed that no one had told them about it. A little later, Nagaveni told them, 'Ask my aunt, she will tell you everything. I can't speak about it,' she said.

Her aunt came back that night. She talked about the past and told them in detail how the girl had suffered because of her husband, and about her exhaustion after miscarriage, and her falling prey to disease. Nagaveni must have screamed out of fear whether this time, too, the child would die.

Sarasothi pronounced just one verdict. 'Whatever you say, child, being born a woman is the outcome of some sin committed in the past. This birth is intended for suffering hell and not for having pleasure.'

But Nagaveni kept on enquiring every moment whether there was a letter or a telegram. She was longing to celebrate the child's naming ceremony, longing to sit with the husband and the child. It was not because of any overflowing of affection but because of her love of life. A letter came on the ninth day. Narayanappa brought it from the post office in Hangarakatté. It wasn't a letter but a telegram. The one they had sent had come back to them. The addressee could not be found. Nagaveni said that he might have been transferred. Wouldn't it have been redirected then, asked Narayanappa. He added that Lachcha must have left the place and gone away somewhere.

Days passed and Nagaveni's 'purification' after childbirth was done in a simple way. Her desire for the child's naming ceremony remained unfulfilled. But shouldn't there be some thought about a name for the child? The elders thought that the grandfather's name would have been suitable, had there

been a naming ceremony. Now, they decided unanimously to call the child either Sanna or Puttu. The name Sanna lasted only for three or four days. Puttu sounded more affectionate and everyone started calling the baby by that name. In nurturing the baby, Nagaveni forgot the anguish in her own mind. The child grew well. His grandfather Vasudevayya had already bought a gold waist string when he came down for the holidays. He spent half the time in Nagaveni's house. He couldn't have enough of fondling his grandson. One day he came to his daughter when she was by herself. 'When I heard you were pregnant again, I was terrified imagining how you would have to go through hell like last time. I was overjoyed to hear that you had given birth to a child,' he said.

Nagaveni's little sister, Krishnaveni, used to come to see her sister often. She was twelve years old. 'Appa, won't Krishna be married this year?' Nagaveni asked her father. 'I am scared after your marriage. She shouldn't go through the same hell you did.' 'What can one do? Just because I am fated to go through all this, it doesn't mean the same will happen to her.' 'Isn't it only after marriage that one finds out what one's fate is? If I had asked someone what this boy was like in Kundapura, I would have known. Now, everyone says that he was always like this.'

Nagaveni felt even more miserable. Her father hadn't talked about Lachcha's affairs before marriage. He had presumed that he might have gone astray in Mangalore. She would longingly tell her father that he should somehow make Lachcha come home. After all, he was the child's father. Her father's answer was consistent. 'It is an alloy of gold and can never be pure gold. I am making enquiries about him. He is nowhere nearby. I heard that that he fought with his bosses in Kerala, quit the job and went away.' This information only made her despair grow.

Vasudevayya was really in the midst of planning the marriages of his eldest son and youngest daughter. His son too had become a lawyer. After getting his degree, he had come to Mangalore and was eligible for marriage. He had refused to get married until then and they were waiting for

his consent. Vasudevayya was worried about which horoscope to choose from among those arriving at the house. But it was not the same for his daughter. Though his relatives approached him to ask for her hand in marriage to their sons, he wasn't courageous enough to go ahead without finding out details about the boys. The lesson learnt on the previous occasion was enough for him. If need be, one could nurture the son-in-law, test him with the touchstone, assess him and then think of marriage. There was no point in getting hold of a musk cat and looking after it, only to discover to one's eventual disappointment that it was a wild cat.

Would it be difficult for a rich and eminent man like him to find alliances? He might have been afraid because of Lachcha's history. But the whole village hadn't got spoilt as such. An alliance arrived from a good family. Sadashiva got married too. His sister was married to his wife's elder brother, an educated man. Both alliances had been fixed at the same time. Vasusdevayya believed that there would be an obligation between the two families and that there would be no scope for any bad blood. Anyway, Nagaveni took her baby to Airodi for her sister's wedding but she could not go to her brother's. Both weddings were over by the time the rainy season began. Vasudevayya left Airodi and went back to his professional arena.

In the house at Kodi, three lonely women sat wondering whether they should count the raindrops or get on with some cultivation Sarasothi said she would work as hard as she could. But she could not do much more than go to the nearby fields and get back. Sathyabhamé had not been involved in cultivation as long as her husband was alive. Now, it would be something to do to while away the time, and she suggested that they plant just one measure of seeds. During the rainy season they did some nominal farming. So, they did find themselves in a state where they had to borrow paddy from others for making haalu-payasa for the Navarathri meal. Nagaveni thought they should cultivate for three measures in future. Huruli should be planted that year and avaré as well. It might not be possible to irrigate the cucumber patch. So, they could drop it. She knew nothing of agriculture. But she agreed with Sarasothi that sitting idle at home and eating was no good.

But her dream wasn't easily realised. Puttu fell prey to a liver disease and Nagaveni's attention was focussed more on the baby than on cultivation. The elders at home went around to other people for medicine. They undertook vows in the name of all the Gods. The hardship they faced for three months after Navarathri was unbearable. But nothing seemed to work.

One day, Puttu lay smiling on the verandah. He was smiling instead of crying as usual. Looking at the child making noises, Nagaveni told Sarasothi that the baby looked cheerful that day. But she cursed herself for saying it.

The child didn't live a day longer. Nagaveni had depended on the child to make her forget all her worries but he slipped out of her reach. A river of tears flowed from her for three days. That he hadn't been lucky to see his father made her cry even more. Controlling herself, though her innards had been torn apart, Sathyabhamé consoled Nagaveni. 'Nagu, is there any point in desiring something that we are not fated to have? The child's debt was paid, and so, God took him away.' Sarasothi had lately grown very accustomed to death. When Nagaveni cried, her heart too would break but the very next moment, she would remember a story from Mahabharatha. 'Nagu, Gandhari gave birth to a hundred sons. Who was left in the end? Why do we come into this world and why do we depart? It's not to bear children and bring them up. He must have a plan. Can we understand all that?' At that moment of anguish, every story that Sarasothi narrated would be soothing to Nagaveni. 'Atté, I haven't had even one of the thousand difficulties you have faced. But I feel sad thinking about my own misfortune. I will learn to bear it.'

There was no information about Lakshminarayana for a year or two. Eventually, Sheena Mayya's son came to the village one day because his father was bedridden. Sarasothi visited him on his deathbed. 'Sarasothi, I believe Lachcha's child passed away. Instead of taking away people like us, what does God intend to do by taking away that small baby?' he asked. When she came out, Sarasothi asked Narasimha, though without any hope, if he had heard anything about Lachcha.

'News of Lachcha? What's wrong with him? He is quite happy in Bowringpet. He comes to Bangalore once in a while and visits us as well. But someone said he had lost everything. Anyway, I do see him now and then. I saw him a fortnight before I came here. He said he had received a letter from home.'

'That's all untrue. It has been three years since he has come home. He did say where he was, once. Later on, he gave up doing even that. When he wrote, it was to ask for money. On the day we stopped sending him money, letter-writing also stopped.'

Narasimha couldn't talk much that day. Sheena Mayya's "illness" was just old age and so, Narasimha had to hurry home to attend to him. Within a few days, Sheena Mayya left the world. Sarasothi was among the grieving neighbours until all the obsequies were over. Then rose the question of who would manage Sheena's household. Should the eldest son stay behind or was it enough if one of the younger ones did so? A decision had to be made. Eventually, the responsibility fell on the third son, Orata. Narasimha had to leave for Bangalore. Papers had to be sorted out before he left. There was the loan Lachcha had taken from Sheena Mayya. It had been taken with his inherited property as collateral. No interest on the amount had been paid so far. So, the total amount including interest was over three thousand rupees. Realising that it was no use asking Lachcha, Narasimha came straight to Aithala's house. There he asked about Sarasothi's welfare. Nagaveni was busy with some work, 'That must be your Lachcha's wife,' Narasimha said.

Sarasothi welcomed him, a rare visitor to their house. 'That's our Nagu. What sort of a moment was it when she took Lachcha's hand in hers? She didn't experience a day's happiness. For people like us without husbands, it is widowhood. She too is facing widowhood though her husband is alive,' she said sorrowfully.

Narasimha took a long time to speak about the purpose of his visit. He had to speak of his own distress after listening

to the sorrow of the women. 'I don't know what has been happening here. Nevertheless, when I looked at our records, I found out that the loan that your Lachcha took is nearly three thousand rupees. The time limit for repayment is over. No money has come back from the day it was lent. I am coming back in six months. Please make some arrangement by then.'

Sarasothi and Sathyabhamé had known nothing of it at all. Why, it was probable that Rama Aithala too hadn't known of the arrangement which had taken place behind his back. Lachcha had taken the loan from Sheena Mayya, offering the security of his inheritance. Who was there to redeem it now? Sarasothi was sad because the site which had been handed down from their elders had been pledged. The news reached Airodi. From there it went to the lawyer. 'I'll sort out everything when I come down during the forthcoming holidays,' he said.

He came down, as did Narasimha from Bangalore, to take some decision about the loan. They decided to go to court for Lachcha's loan and started litigation when the court session began. The case went on for six months. Though Lachcha received a summons from the court, he stayed faraway, saying nothing, knowing what would happen next. He did not come anywhere near the area. In the auction that was held, Nagaveni acquired the house. But the rest was gone. 'If he had sold the house which belonged to the elders, you would have lost it as well. Now that you have acquired it in the auction, it will remain in your name,' said the father.

Nagaveni said, 'What does it matter now, what I have and what I don't have? If the child had stayed alive, I would have lived on for him. Now, it is different. For whom is this property?' Her father heard her and felt grief inside him. He kept thinking he had killed Nagaveni with his own hands.

Time wouldn't stop. It never waits for anyone, it appears. It being so, would it wait for Lakshminarayana to come to his senses?

Nagaveni would take a measure of the time that passed, cultivating paddy in the rainy season, huruli in the month of Kodi, and cucumber in the backyard at Makara Sankranthi. Once in a while, she would recall how much time had passed since she first wore a thali round her neck, how many years had gone by without her seeing her husband, how many days had passed since Puttu had slipped away. To her, Sarasothi was like a child. She was nearly seventy. The flesh on her body had stuck to her bones. Her eyesight was dim and she had to keep feeling her way around to reach places she knew very well. At every moment, Nagaveni loved talking to Sarasothi, such as she was. Sarasothi was like a God in that house.

Sarasothi held Nagaveni's hand and told her tales about her youth. She would talk of the pain behind her poverty. She would tell the story of the way Rama Aithala had lived so long after marrying Parothi. 'It is only this withered branch, which has seen all this, that floats in the flood of death. Why should it survive?' she would argue. Nagaveni, like a child, said, 'Atté, it's enough if you live as long as I do.'

'You are still young. You must live on. God should make Lachcha see sense now at least and bring him to you. But what can I do by living on? But I am foolish. There is just one impossible desire that is bothering me. If I had told Anna when he was alive, he would have had the strength to do it. Now it is just a cry in the wilderness.'

'What is your desire, Atté? Your whole life is a sacrifice.'

'That's not it, child. I would have liked to have gone to Kashi before dying. How good it would be if God were to take my life away in Kashi. But not everyone can hope for that. If there was nothing else, I could have at least been dipped in the waters of Bhagirathi and brought back. What use now? After I have gone blind, when the nephew has turned immoral, what's there in Kashi or Kumbhakashi? Everything is at home.'

Sarasothi quenched the girl's thirst for stories about Kashi by narrating many of them. She described the journey

on foot to Kashi which Kodanda Aithala, Rama's father, had undertaken.

The sixth Yugadi arrived. That meant six years since Puttu had parted from Nagaveni. She hadn't left home for any distant place since then. Once in a while, she went to Airodi and returned in the evening. She would come back running, scared that Sarasothi might have fallen in the river or tripped over while walking. Nagaveni would be filled with fear thinking about this, every time she went away leaving Sarasothi behind.

Yugadi was over. When Vaishakha arrived, Vasudevayya came to see his daughter. He informed everyone about Lachcha. 'Starting a hotel in Mysore, Bangalore and wherever else he went, borrowing money, gambling, and then running away from there — this is what has been going on. The other day, when I was not at home, he had come looking for Sadashiva. Finally, he took from him five rupees to go back by bus. He wouldn't stay back for lunch even when he was asked to.'

'He should come back to his senses at least now, and bring life back to the girl,' said Sarasothi.

'What is it to him, saving her life or taking it away?'

'Has he come back home?' asked Sarasothi.

'As long as I am there, he won't come. But he may come later to extract money. Nagaveni, tell him to ask your father for anything to do with money.'

Vasudevayya stayed there that night. He sat talking with his daughter and spoke of his younger daughter with joy. 'They are both well in Madras. She writes home often. The son-in-law is a good man. He earns a hundred rupees a month,' he said with pleasure. He talked about the welfare of her brothers. Looking at him being so happy, Nagaveni said, 'Appa, I want you to do something. You must not say no.' When he asked her what it was, she asked him to promise to do it. 'I shall do it if I can,' he said. 'It is nothing really. Sarasothi is getting on in years. If the house still stands, it is because of her. Can't we fulfil the one desire she has?'

'What is it?'

'She says she wants to go to Kashi. She has no courage to ask. She wonders who would carry an eyeless burden like her. If my misfortune can be overcome by her purity and virtue....'

Vasudevayya didn't speak for some time. 'Yes, my child,' he said eventually. 'My hair is also turning white. I shall leave my advocacy with Sadashiva . I shall take you along and her as well.'

'I won't come, Appa. I shall ask if my mother-in-law would like to go with you. I have my Kashi here.'

Vasudevayya could not persuade her to change her mind. Finally, it was decided that the two old people at home would go. Vasudevayya started making preparations for the journey the very next day.

Nagaveni told Sarasothi the next day that her father was going to Kashi and would take her and Sathyabhamé with him. 'It's enough that I have heard something like that. I don't want him to be troubled by a blind woman like me. What if I die on the way? If no one is troubled by me, isn't it the same as a pilgrimage to Kashi? Sathya, you go.' Sarasothi said. Sathyabhamé was happy. But, who would stay at home? Nagaveni pressured them a lot. 'The two of you must go,' she said, and even cried to make them agree. 'There is a train and a bus and you can get back within a month. You don't have to walk.' Eventually, it was her tearful insistence that won. It was decided that the older women would go on the journey. After sowing and transplanting were over, they would leave and be back in time for harvesting.

The day of departure arrived. Nagaveni was brimming over with joy. She talked and talked with Atté the night before until her throat went dry, though there was still something more to say. Her father came to pick them up. Everyone got ready for the journey. Sarasothi was tearful when the moment for leaving came. 'Nagu, I don't know in what state I will get back. But if God keeps an eye on you, it's all the same to me

where I die,' she said. 'You will certainly come back here, Atté. I still need to massage your feet,' Nagaveni said.

Nagaveni was insistent that the old woman be taken in a palanquin. 'No, I shall walk. Our elders who went to Kashi had walked all the way.' Sarasothi was equally insistent. Eventually, Sarasothi held Nagu's hand, went to the river crossing, and stuck to her decision. The village people came to the point of crossing the river, playing the pipes, and saw them off. Nagaveni went right up to Airodi and waited till they left. Yet again, there was a tearful farewell.

Nagaveni came home with wet cheeks. Her uncle said that she could stay back one night. He would send some servants to her house. 'I must light lamps before God myself. When Atté was there, she would not miss doing it even for one night. She left me in charge of it. Shouldn't I do at least that one thing?' she answered. Her uncle could say nothing in reply.

A servant sent by Vasudevayya followed her. When they reached home, a man was seen wandering around in the yard. 'Amma,' said the servant, 'It must be a thief. Otherwise, would he have chosen to come here when you had left?'

'What can thieves find here?' asked Nagaveni, and looked. Somebody could be seen. Yes. But he could not be recognised. Even when she entered the house, the man was still standing there. It was even more difficult to recognise who he was. His appearance was ungainly. His torn clothes, dishevelled hair, unshaven face and sleepless eyes enhanced his strange appearance.

'Who is that?' asked the servant.

The man said nothing.

'Who is that?' the servant asked yet again, in anger. 'What's your business here when no one is at home?'

The man laughed.

Nagaveni became suspicious and went near him. 'It's you. You have come. Have you eaten?'

'I have come, yes. Can you recognise me?'

She looked at the servant. 'It's my husband,' she said with joy.

That night Nagaveni was a strange mixture of intense emotions. There was the joy of reunion with her husband mingled with an equal measure of sadness because Sarasothi wasn't there. The memory of the dead child eclipsed the happiness she felt on seeing her husband. Many thoughts jostled with one another and caused turbulence in the lake of her mind.

~18~

For a few days after arriving home, Lakshminarayana behaved very much like a guest. Nagaveni was in no mood either, to extend him any great hospitality. The feeling of intimacy had been severed a long time ago. There was even a kind of revulsion towards her husband after Puttu's death. She was not a 'bad woman' to ask her husband who had come home to leave. She didn't think it was appropriate. 'Lunch is ready, bath is ready' she would say, and unroll a bed in the verandah for him at bedtime. She would go inside and sleep. The servant slept outside. Lakshminarayana made no special effort to speak to her. He knew well enough what happened after he had left. He had got most of the news before he stepped into the village.

But he was certainly not in a state of despair and indifference. Though he stayed quiet for a couple of days, he opened his mouth on the fourth day. It was when Nagaveni sat before the stove, blowing at the damp firewood in it and wiping her eyes. 'Nagaveni,' he said, 'Should I stay here or leave?'

'Have I asked you to leave?'

'No, you haven't. But you don't talk to me either.'

'What do I have to say? We were like so much trash and you trampled on us and left. Why should you now place on us the burden of speech?'

'What has happened has happened. My luck is bad. I didn't prosper in whatever I undertook to do. However hard I tried, there were losses and more losses. Who was there to whom I could express my agony?'

Nagaveni could not make any sense of what he said.

She said nothing and Lakshminarayana was worried. 'Shouldn't I stay here? If so, tell me. I have no wish to be a burden on anyone. Though this was my father's property, I was made to spread my hands for alms before all of you. I was forced to live without honour. In spite of that, I said I would stay here. If you don't want me to, I shall go away. The little property I had was made over to you on the pretext of clearing a loan. You have so much and yet you made me beg.'

Nagaveni listened quietly to her husband. She was also fed up. She couldn't listen to his poisonous talk. 'My father didn't do anything just for my sake. He did so in order to ensure that the property wouldn't be totally lost. The three thousand rupees given to Narasimha Mayya – who lost it? You did. Would you rather have lost the house and the site, too? What is salvaged – is it only for me to sit back and enjoy, and not for you?

It was not a speech devoid of wisdom. Lakshminarayana kept very quiet. The next three days were spent in eating, sleeping, and in between, visiting his old friend Orata Mayya a couple of times. He had shaved and his beggar-like appearance had gone. However, he had changed from what he was before. His plumpness had disappeared and he was mere skin and bones. Nagaveni wasn't happy to see him like that. 'How did you bring back this desiccated body? Even after coming here, you have done nothing. Why don't you take treatment from someone who knows medicine? If you don't want to get treated here, go to a doctor in Udupi,' she said one day when he sat down to eat.

'The doctor's treatment isn't free. Money will have to be spent.'

'Did I say I wouldn't give you money for that?' she asked. That very day, he took five rupees from her and went to Udupi in the evening. Three days elapsed before he came back. 'They say they need at least fifty rupees for medicine. They have given me something to drink for the time being. Bitter medicine. Which devil should drink it?' he said when he came back.

'Look, you have to drink it if you want to get well. But where do I go and get the fifty rupees? After Appa comes back from the pilgrimage, I shall ask for it and give it to you.'

'There you are! I told you that I was a beggar in this household. By the time you send an application, the money is sanctioned and my sickness cured, my journey to the crematorium will be half-way through.'

Nagaveni bit her lips. She had been a witness to quite a few journeys to the crematorium. She felt as if she was struck by a flash of lightning when the talk of erasing her kumkuma and of widowhood came up. She was silent the whole day. The next morning, she took off a pair of her bangles. 'Here. Take these and get your medicine. You can stay here. I shall look after your diet and whatever else that needs to be done. If you need things like milk and curds, you won't get them in any other place.'

He felt there was some hope because of her grace.

The next day he paid a visit to Orata. He pawned the gold jewellery there, took a loan of fifty rupees and went to Udupi. He did go to the doctor there but the restrictions that went with the treatment seemed impossible to live with. The restriction that he had to stay away from women was terrible. He filled up the bottle with medicine and left the place. From there, realising that his home did not suit one who goes on a diet, he went south to the market and got lost in a prostitute's house. He went back home after three days.

Medication went on for a few days. There was even appreciation expressed about its efficacy. He found staying at

home boring and so came in only for meals. He spent the rest of the day in Orata's company. It was there that the gossip of the whole village was available. Orata's business was considerable — money lending, court, banking and buying property. So, his house was a place where people came and went. There Lakshminarayana would spend time with pleasure. The news of his arrival reached Airodi. Vasudevayya's brother came to Nagaveni's house.

'I won't ask you not to give him food and water. But don't give him even a paisa in cash. Don't let him come into your room. It is said that he has uncommon diseases now,' he warned.

Orata needed someone to run errands in the village. It had been a couple of years since his return from Bangalore. He was still ill at ease in his dealings with the place. Moreover, he had been quite the man-about-town, and didn't like village life. Though he was afraid of what his brother had said about Lachcha, there was room for excitement because he had acquired the friendship of Lakshminarayana, who belonged to the village. His mother warned him. 'Am I a child to be caught in his trap? He is none but a person who helps me spend time,' Orata reassured his mother.

It was a month and a half after Lachcha had arrived. His emaciated body had filled out after regular meals and care and he had gained some energy. But the disease he had contracted could not be cured instantly even with all the attention he was given. The only outcome of the care bestowed on his body was the disappearance of the bangles and the fifty rupees.

Though his mind was never very far from thoughts of sex, Lachcha didn't have the courage to talk to Nagaveni. He was afraid that she might ask him if it was not enough to have lost two children. It wasn't as if he had not noticed how careful and fearful she was in her dealings with him. So, he had even taunted her saying he had become a leper. Nagaveni couldn't say a thing. She felt she might be saved if those who had gone on the pilgrimage returned.

Did it need an aeon to come back from the journey? It was not like the time when Kodanda Aithala went with his father walking half the way and covering the rest of the journey by train, feeling exhausted. This was a time when one could reach Kashi without one's feet touching the ground. Vasudevayya visited Kashi and Rameshwara in seven weeks and came back home. Nagaveni rushed to Airodi and welcomed them. She whispered in Sarasothi's ears that Lachcha arrived the same day they left. 'What does it matter whether he comes home or not?' she said.

Sathyabhamé and Sarasothi reached home. For two days, their house was full of people, with the women and old men of the village coming to see them. 'Ajji, you are a worthy person. It's God's grace that you have come back from the pilgrimage at this age,' they said, falling at her feet. Sathyabhamé too was considered to be a fortunate woman.

There flowed a stream of smiles on Sarasothi's face since she returned home. Her contentment knew no bounds. 'Nagaveni, your father fulfilled my desire. You did it. The merit of your act will not elude you,' she blessed her over and over again. 'If my husband gets better and becomes a good man with all your blessings....' Nagaveni said. Sathyabhamé heard her words and thought that he would become a wise man only on the day a wooden pestle sprouted leaves. Lachcha had come as well. He stepped into the house only after the stream of visitors from the village had dried up. He didn't speak to anyone on his own. It was only when Sarasothi asked him how he was that he said that he was still alive, though unwanted by the village, unwanted even by the God of death. She was hurt. 'The God of death is for us, not for young men like you,' she said.

Wouldn't Nagaveni reaslise that what he said was meant to hurt Sarasothi? That evening, she faced Lachcha. 'Why did you talk like that? Who has wished for your death in this household? That's not the way you should talk to her.' Lachcha was angry. 'You are advising me with the arrogance of one who owns property, aren't you? How easy it is to give advice!'

Nagaveni was upset. 'What is the matter with you? What you are saying has nothing to do with what I said. All that I said was that you shouldn't hurt her.'

'I know you are the mistress of the house. When I faced difficulties, you were not willing to send me three hundred to four hundred rupees but sent me into exile. You pushed me into a life in the wilderness. And now, you don't bother at all to spend lots of money to send someone you care for to Kashi and Rameshwara. When it is so, who else should I belong to except Yamadharma? I shouldn't have said those words. But when I am so full of pain, I have to speak out.' Nagaveni realised that there was no point in answering and walked away. Sathyabhamé was furious.' Settling your loan of three thousand rupees was nothing, but the money spent on our pilgrimage stands out, doesn't it? Would all this have happened if you were in your senses?'

'Sathya, say nothing,' said Sarasothi quietly. 'Who else should grumble in this household if not he? I have a month or six months before I die. Brahma might have written on my forehead that I should listen to all this before I die. Let it be so.' All through the evening, she wondered whether she should be in Nagaveni's — no, Lachcha's — debt despite having gone to Kashi. Unable to control herself, she talked to Nagaveni. 'My child, it's right that Sathyabhamé stays here. Her husband's property is hers. But I belong elsewhere as I am from a different gothra. Lachcha doesn't like my staying here. Tomorrow morning, I shall leave for Mandarthi. They won't push me out during my dying days.'

Nagaveni was very upset. 'Atté, this is nobody's property. It has been left by his ancestors. If the house is in this condition, it is all because of you. Who is there to say that you should leave? If he wants to stay here, he shall not say such things again. Five years went by without him. But when you were away for a month and half, I didn't feel I was alive at all,' Nagaveni said. Though these words were meant to console, they were really aimed at her husband. The old woman felt hurt again for a different reason. `Whatever he is, he is after all your husband. You shouldn't say such things to

him. Whether I stay here or not, your enmity towards him is not good,'

Lachcha arrived there at that moment. 'You are a lawyer's daughter. You should know the law well. That's fine. You live in this house which is yours by right. I shall go into exile.' That night, he didn't even eat at home. He just went off. Not very far though. He went to his friend Orata who loved to listen to Lachcha's talk. Moreover, he was the friend next door. Wouldn't Lachcha find shelter there?

For the next two months, he didn't set foot in his own house. He stayed in Orata's place and sent barbed messages to Nagaveni through guests and visitors. Some of his words would pierce right through her heart. He went so far as to insinuate in one of the messages that the old husband didn't matter much when a new one was around. Nagaveni's heart got hardened . Hatred towards him took the place of sympathy. But she never said a word in reply. Amidst all that, Sathyabhamé had heard what her son had said and had turned into an enraged serpent. 'What does it matter if such children die instead of getting born?' she said. But for Sarasothi, the peace she had acquired after her pilgrimage to Kashi was totally destroyed. 'The sooner I close my eyes, the better it will be for me. But it is Dakshinayana now and the door to heaven will be shut. It will have to be after Makara Sankranthi, I suppose.'

'Why do you say that? Death won't come according to our wish. But God will never give you an uneasy death,' Sathyabhamé would say.

One day, a young son of Orata came. 'Isn't Nagavenamma there?' he enquired, Nagaveni heard his call and came out. Sarasothi heard his voice too and wanted to find out who it was. The boy said that his father had sent him to sat that Nagavenamma should go along with him to his house.

'What business have I there?' she asked. 'Why should I come?'

'I don't know all that. Your husband is going to be taken away,' the boy said, plunging them into greater confusion.

'You don't go. Carry on with cooking. I shall go and see what the matter is,' said Sathyabhamé and followed the boy to Orata's house. A totally unexpected sight waited for her there. Lakshminarayana stood there as a civil prisoner. A warrant was out to arrest him because of a loan he had taken in Malabar. It was discovered that unless someone stood surety for his loan, he would be taken to jail. Sathyabhamé was afraid at the very mention of jail. She came back home running with the information. Could Nagaveni endure the shame that her husband had to face? 'Whatever he is, can we watch him going to prison?' asked Sarasothi.

Nagaveni herself had to go to Orata's house and find out what could be done. Orata told her that if the debt of eight hundred rupees and a little more was paid in cash, Lachcha would be set free. How could she have that much cash? Was there enough time to get it from her father? Eventually, it was decided that Orata himself would pay the amount and Nagaveni would write a promissory note for it.

Everything was done accordingly and Nagaveni came home. She answered Doddatté's questions and told them everything in detail. 'It's all right if this is all. But who knows what else will follow?' One debt was cleared. But Lakshminarayana stayed on with Orata. He often went to Udupi with Orata and taught him all the virtuous lessons he had learnt. Their friendship grew strong and the information reached the ears of Orata's mother. Feeling scared, she had a letter written to her eldest son.

Makara Sankranthi approached and Narasimha worriedly left Bangalore for his village, having heard about his brother. Though he told others that he had come for the festivities connected with the family deity, he had really come to preach to Orata. 'Even his own family including his wife have thrown him out. How can you keep him at home?' Narasimha scolded his brother. Orata was obdurate. He was also influenced by Lachcha's counselling. So, the month that Narasimha spent with his brother saw frequent fights. He also realised that the household would come to no good if its responsibility was left in his brother's hands. Orata also came to know of his brother's

way of thinking. It was then that Lakshminarayana suggested that he ask for his share in the property.

Consequently, Sheena Mayya's house was divided. It was separated into five parts when the matter of sharing came up for settlement. Though the other brothers cooperated with the eldest son, Orata was insistent upon staying in his father's house as part of his share. The mother became an enemy of the son. Another brother of Orata had to come from Bangalore to take over the management of the property shared by the others.

The episode provided an occupation for Lakshminarayana. Fights, telling tales and lies — all were combined, and it was easy to while away the days. When Orata separated from the rest of the family, he started pestering Nagaveni for money. She had to get her money from her father to pay fines on his behalf. More warrants followed the fines. The debts that Lachcha had incurred in Bowringpet by opening hotels, those incurred in Ballari — they all came chasing him one after another. Demands for payment and threats of sending him to prison were constantly present. Knowing full well that Nagaveni would never let her husband to go to jail, the creditors achieved their purpose. One could keep cursing the husband but could he be sent to Cannanore jail? The debts kept on being paid off and the cash at home was exhausted. The last debt remained as a claim on the property. It was when she was clearing it that Vasudevayya came down. He called Lachcha and told him of his decision. 'We can clear this debt only by getting into debt ourselves. The cash that your forefathers left is all gone. If there are more debts to be cleared, there is no cash. It is all the same if a man like you stays inside a prison or outside. If you become respectable, stay home, improve your health and stop troubling others in the family, I shall clear this debt. Otherwise, it would be better for you to stay somewhere else but not here.'

Like any man seeking the help of God at a time of distress, Lachccha was prepared to give any kind of assurance in order to clear the burden of debt. Eventually, he moved out of Orata's verandah and came home. 'It's my misfortune. I can

give you no happiness and I am not happy either.' There was even sadness in the words he spoke. Though he didn't give up visiting Orata, there was no lamentation at home. Under Nagaveni's compulsion, he even began to look after his health.

Lately, Sarasothi had been getting weaker day by day. However, she was determined not to seek help in doing what she had to do her own. She groped for walls and windows, used sticks, and didn't stop moving about. 'Whatever it might be,' she thought one day, 'I shall perform a Shanthi to get rid of the bad luck pursuing Lachcha. Let us show his horoscope to someone who can read it well.' Sathyabhamé showed her son's horoscope to someone she knew. 'It is nothing but Saturn's harassment. The moment for it to leave him has arrived. It will leave any time now. At the time of release, perform a Chandi Homa and Shanthi. If you feed a few brahmins, it will bring good times.' Sathyabhamé told the others what had been advised.

Nagaveni's hopes sprouted. If what the elders said and what the horoscope showed promised a way out, then they could do all that. She started making suitable arrangements. Lachcha went to the brahmins and invited them for the Shanthi. On that day, a couple who hadn't sat together for ever so long, sat side by side and took part in the rituals.Even then, Nagaveni's spirit was not willing to sit with Lachcha. But if meant good times for the man who took her as his wife, she shouldn't stand in the way. She put on as pleasant a face as possible and sat with him wearing ritual-prescribed narumadi. The community of brahmins ate well, blessed the couple and took leave.

Lachcha displayed pleasant behaviour from that day. He did everything he could do to keep Nagaveni happy. Looking at his behaviour over the last seven or eight months, even Sathyabhamé, who had despaired of her son, started wishing that God had changed His mind much before this. No one made Lachcha angry at home. The very same year that the Shanthi was performed, he got enthusiastic enough to harvest a measure of forty-two seers of grain and started working.

The rainy season stepped in slowly. Lachcha's agricultural efforts showed green in the fields. The same freshness of mind filled the household. Lachcha behaved in a free and friendly manner at home.

One night, he lay in the verandah coughing a lot. He had caught the cough because of the rain. When dinner was over and everyone had retired, 'Nagaveni,' he said, 'If it is not going to be too much trouble, could you please make me a decoction of ginger and pepper? I have a bad cough. It shouldn't get worse tomorrow.' 'Why do you need to plead in this way?' she said. The decoction was made ready and she took it to him. They both sat there talking. Lachcha drank the decoction and coped with its taste. Then he sat before her delving into the sweet dreams of agriculture. His hand sought Nagaveni's hands and slowly held them. 'Nagaveni, how long has it been since you forsook me?' he asked in a trembling voice. She was amazed by the touch of his hand. Ever since her husband came back, she had not been his companion at night. The very thought made her shake with fear. That night, who knows why, she could not put up a fight against him. Didn't she desire his company? Yes, she did. She would often think that she was a widow though her husband was alive. But she trembled thinking of the consequences of any such intimacy. Moreover, she remembered her father's strict orders on the matter. But she was young.... The desire of the body enticed her after such a long time. She gave herself to her man who had been biding his time. That day became a day of a new fear for her.

A few days passed. The early days of her marriage had come to her, she thought, and believed that the evil spirit which had haunted the house had left.

The crops weren't destroyed that year. Lachcha's cultivation brought in a lot of paddy. 'We shouldn't take on so much every year. It is enough if we have the produce from a few fields. This is a job that will reduce you to nothing,' he said. Paddy was heaped up in the outer verandah. In the yard rose a haystack as tall as four men standing one on top of another. On the day of Balipuja, four flares shone in four

directions. On Padya of Deepavali, Nagaveni gave Doddamma the news. 'I don't know what you will say. I don't know what will happen in future! I am pregnant again.' She was trembling as she spoke.

'God has driven away the evil spirit. And so, all this has happened. Lachcha has regained his senses. God will look after you in future. Don't worry about anything,' said Doddatté. Nagaveni sobbed. 'Let your merit at least give me the good fortune of becoming a mother and living,' Nagaveni prayed. She collapsed and touched the feet of the elderly woman. Sarasothi stroked Nagaveni's face and body as she would a child's and said, 'Child, pray to God. He will show you the way.'

'To me, you are God,' said Nagaveni. Sarasothi was embarrassed. 'I am growing old and you say that? I am like a withered tamarind branch, just adding on years. It is enough if I close my eyes some day. I expected the call to come at Uttarayana the other day. It didn't come. Even Dakshinayana is here. If only I could get through this Makara Sankranthi.'

'Makara Sankranthi should pass. I should deliver and you should be there to put a spoon of milk in my baby's mouth.'

'God will show the way, my child,' the old woman said. Who else could have such unshakeable faith?

Makara Sankranthi arrived. It was Saligrama fair the very next day. Narasimha of Saligrama was their family deity. So, Sarasothi called Lachcha. 'You take Nagaveni to the temple and offer fruits and coconuts yourself. No matter if she has to walk slowly.' Lachcha had the same sort of faith in God and everything else. And so he agreed. He went with his mother and Nagveni and made the offerings. Nagaveni handed over the prasada to Sarasothi.

Amidst all this joy, Lachcha did go on visiting Orata and setting him up against his younger brothers. One day, Orata said that he didn't like the village at all. 'If I stay here, my property won't last long. When my big brother runs a hotel and is making money, should I just stay on here?

Moreover, he has opened a new hotel in Mysore as well. It seems business is good there too. Well, I shall lease out this property, go to Mysore and run my own hotel.' Lachcha said it was the right thing to do.

The two bits of news in Kodi at the time of Vaishakha were of Orata leaving the village and Nagaveni giving birth to a baby boy after nine months of pregnancy. Orata went alone to Mysore. He opened 'Delhi Durbar Hotel' in front of his brother's 'Sree Rama Restaurant'. He often wrote to Lachcha about all his activities.

Nagaveni didn't want to go to her mother's place for the delivery of her child. 'Who is there at home? It is not right that I go there,' she said. However, before her term was over, she fell ill and her heath started deteriorating. But, by God's grace, she gave birth without facing any danger. It was a boy and he was weak. By the time she became aware of it, she had fallen prey to worry, considering that he was her third child and the number three was not auspicious. But she couldn't speak about it. Though there was no dearth of people to look after her after the baby was born, it was a difficult time nevertheless. There was no mother's milk for the infant. Sathyabhamé had to pick him up, dip cotton wool in cow's milk and squeeze it into his mouth. The mother was too weak to look after the baby. Lachcha went quite a few times to Udupi and brought the medicine and other things that she needed. Tender words were not in short supply either. However, his mind didn't appear to be centred on the house.

The baby passed the three-month term. Though its stomach was distended, its other activities were not discouraging. When her father came to visit, he had found out what his daughter needed. He supplied the necessary medication. He forced her to take some medicine to give her strength. In the olden days, Doddatté wouldn't let her drink such 'impure' medicine from the hospital. But she agreed when Vasudevayya said it was necessary if the only child of Nagu had to survive. She believed it could be God's will. So, Lachcha was spared quite a bit of the burden of caring.

By Navarathri, the child's growth was natural but for its size. Sathyabhamé fostered the child with great care. But Nagaveni's doubts would not leave her. Once in a while, she would console herself thinking that Doddatté had said that God would show the way. He might, perhaps, she thought.

Lately, her worry about her husband was greater than that about her child. She watched the cheerfulness on Lachcha's face gradually diminishing. She also realised that he was depressed when he talked to her. However, he was not curt in his speech but his indifference did make her concerned about its cause. She couldn't discover why the zest and lightheartedness he had exhibited during the last four months had disappeared. She took courage once and asked him why he was gloomy. He didn't reply. After being asked the same question over and over again, he said, 'What sort of life is mine? It is the life of a widow!'

'What do you mean?'

'I am living on someone else's charity. I am educated but am unable to earn my living.'

'What do you lack here? Isn't this your home?'

'My home? When I listen to what people say, I wonder if it is really mine.'

'What does that mean?'

'People in the village say it is the life of a man who has to look to his wife for his daily gruel. Should a man like that keep alive, they ask. I am fed up with listening to such talk.'

She could say nothing more. A few days passed. Once, Lakshminarayana was playing with the child. 'Nagaveni, doesn't the child need a name? What's nice about calling it 'Koosu,' a child, all the time? Is he the child of the Koosalu tribe? Shouldn't he have a name?'

'Let's look for a good name and give it to him. Let's do it on his birthday. What's the hurry?'

'I want to go away somewhere after naming him.'

'Are you leaving me?'

'I don't want to. It's not as if I am going to be happy elsewhere. But I must earn enough money to feed myself. I must make use of my education to earn and live my life. One of my brothers-in-law became a lawyer. Another, a doctor. My classmates are all doing well. I am like a ghost wandering for ever. I can't go on like this for a long time.'

'Wait for a few days,' said Nagaveni. Her mind was in a turmoil during those days. Even the sea with all its waves during the months of rain and storm couldn't have resembled her mind. Her emotions wouldn't disperse into tiny drops. Wave after wave rose and fell in the sea of her mind and she decided to speak to Lachcha after a few days. 'I haven't kept this property for myself. I shall transfer it to you so that it's in your name again. I can understand your anguish. How can I be happy if you live with this attitude of indifference?'

After Saligrama festival was over, Lachcha said very cunningly that he would take Nagaveni to Udupi. He went to Brahmavara and had all the property transferred to him. Nagaveni told no one about it. Neither did Lachcha. Everyone thought they had gone to Udupi for Krishna Darshana.

Summer arrived. The 'Koosu' was a year old. There was discussion about choosing a name for him. Sarasothi said a few brahmins could be invited, given a meal and the child could be given his grandfather's name. Sathyabhamé agreed heartily. Unwilling to forget the affection her father-in-law had shown her, Nagaveni too approved of the suggestion. Though Lachcha was filled with as much contempt as hatred towards his father, he too agreed. The boy was named on his birthday. Rama Aithala's spirit might have felt contented through the name given to his grandson.

A month after the naming, Orata Mayya came from Mysore. He said that his 'Delhi Durbar Hotel' had opened quite sometime ago and that it was doing very well. He boasted that even a silverfish wouldn't venture into his brother's hotel because his own was so much better. He had come to raise loans by pledging his property so that he could take on the adventure of opening branches of 'Delhi Durbar' in Bangalore.

Lachcha had now got back the right over the property. He enthused over Orata's plans and thought of becoming his partner. They discussed the plan at great length. Lachcha told him about the new circumstances he was in. Orata needed support for building his castles in the air. And so, it was decided that they would take on the project together, one being in charge of the hotel in Bangalore and the other looking after the one in Mysore.

What a plan! It was drawn up wholly outside their houses and the information didn't even reach Nagaveni's ears. Lachcha knew that the old owls in the house would come in his way if they came to know of it. So, he left home on the pretext of going to Udupi for a few days and staying there for his medication. At the moment of leaving, he picked up Rama, fondled him and even asked him what he wanted from Udupi.

A week passed by and a month as well. Sarasothi started longing to see him. 'He's like a dog's tail,' said Sathyabhamé. The other two had no suspicion. They thought that he would certainly come back. Meanwhile, Narasimha Mayya came home after a year. He knew all about the business deals of his brother. He visited their house as well. Wouldn't the talk veer around Lachcha? 'He has come to Bangalore to open a hotel with my brother. We could make money from hotels a long time ago, but, can one do it now? Our Orata is obstinate and is determined to destroy me. Lachcha has joined him in the venture,' he said.

Sarasothi was scared on hearing this. Nagaveni was silent. She held the baby in her arms and cried.

Eventually, she came to Doddatté. 'I have ruined the child with my own hands. I never dreamt that he could cheat me like this,' she said. She talked about how the property had gone from her hands. The sorrow turned into a blaze. Not knowing what to do next, they called her uncle. He was furious with Nagaveni. 'Nagu, why did you do such a thing without telling me even one word about it?' he asked. Nagaveni could give no answer. She could only sob. Narayanappa found out

everything and went to Bangalore for her sake. He asked many people to advise Lachcha.

'Didn't you force me into a position when I had to fall at your girl's feet for a property that was mine?' That was his only retort.

~19~

Sathyabhamé was the sort to be bewildered by even minor troubles. She could not face the new calamity that her son had brought about. She hadn't imagined that her daughter-in-law would fall prey to her husband's deceit and tie down her own hands. As a result, her attitude towards Nagaveni hardened. 'You knew very well what he was like. Yet, you did something like this without breathing a word to us, the worthless old women at home. Tomorrow if he sells this house to someone, won't they throw us all out, regardless of our being his mother and his aunt? Should we be in this state at the moment of death?' she complained. 'Why do you bother the child?' asked Sarasothi from where she sat. 'When fate wills, this is what happens to one. What can she do? Even we believed in the way he behaved. We praised him, believing what the horoscope forecast. What can this child do?'

But Sathyabhamé couldn't be consoled. She had bad dreams the whole night. The next morning she said, 'I don't care even if you get upset. I can't stay here looking at the baby's face and go through all this anguish. I shall stay in Subbi's house for a few days. Isn't there a limit even to one's suffering?' She followed it up by going away the same day. She called old Soora and went with him to her daughter's house in Mandarthi.

Nagaveni, Sarasothi and Rama were the only ones left at home. Nagaveni was ashamed of her stupidity; she was sad too. But it was futile. It was not likely that her husband would

come home. Even if he did, it would be only after losing everything. Sarasothi who was half-blind before was now totally blind. She would hold the baby and play with it. She would call once in a while to tell her not to worry, for no man would avert the difficulties which God chose to present. She would thus console her. But Nagaveni could not bring herself to speak. There was just one thought running through her mind. 'Why should I live so that the child can grow up and suffer my anguish as well? That will be very difficult for the poor child. If an end arrives for this life soon, everyone will be happy.' But she had to live on for the sake of Sarasothi. She waited in anticipation of her own end. She did speak of it once or twice too. 'Doddatté, it is the same if people like us live or die,' she would say and cry. Sarasothi remembered the story of Nala and narrated it. Nagaveni said in response, 'Atté, let anything happen to us. But I am scared the child may be fated to beg in the street for food. The ones that arrived before died and reached heaven, but for this one, living has turned into hell.'

Her words came true. Within just three months, news came that their property had been sold for a lot of money. Lachcha had sold it for cash to a rich man in Udupi and he had given notice to Nagaveni saying that they wanted possession of the house and its contents.

Nagaveni couldn't eat a morsel that day. She gave the child some milk, left him with the old woman to play and ran to her uncle's house. He went to Udupi and held negotiations with the people who had bought the property. Why should they have any compassion? 'I have given eight thousand rupees in cash. It's not a small amount,' he had said, the uncle reported. Even the effort made to buy it back wasn't fruitful. Eventually, for the sake of his niece, he secured Rama Aithala's site and three fields in his own name on a long term lease. Wasn't even that a great favour?

Narayanayya sat before the old woman. 'All these things have happened. A time has come to work as labourers and eat. Let's do what we can. We who sold flowers before have now to sell grass.' Sarasothi was saddened. 'If I die, her father will

look after her. If this grandson of my brother grows up, he will at least provide his mother some gruel to drink. I have that trust. I don't think he will inherit his father's wickedness. Until then, who knows where I will be? But, as long as I live, I can't bear to see her begging. How can she work in the field, look after the child and pay for the lease as well?'

'Aren't we all here? Won't we look after you? The shelter you have should not be taken away. I thought that you could keep on staying here by working in the fields at least. If the long term lease is not wanted, you can leave it and come with me. The three of you won't be a burden to me,' Narayanappa said.

Sarasothi called Nagu. 'Listen to your uncle. You go there with your child or else, stay with your father. This is Rama's house anyway. The two of us will bide our time here as long as possible. Had we both remained in Kashi, we could have at least faced death in a place of pilgrimage. Now we don't have that privilege either.'

Nagaveni spoke to her uncle. 'You may go now. There is no hurry at present. There is enough rice at home till summer. We shall think about everything else after Appa comes here.' After he left, she sat crying. The child too cried watching his mother weep. She thought he must be hungry and boiled some gruel in the evening. Sarasothi didn't eat at night. Nagaveni herself didn't want anything either. But she didn't want the child to suffer and so she fed him. She lit a lantern, swept the floor by its light, spread a couple of mats on either side and made the baby's bed, in between. Before sleeping, she brought Doddatté to bed holding her hand. She didn't speak a word the whole day, nor did the old woman.

One evening, Vasudevayya came home in a rush. He had got his brother's letter. He had heard that his daughter's house had been ruined and that they were all destitute. Not knowing what else to do, he had come immediately. His own family had grown and the house was full of children. He had to match income and expenditure in Mangalore. However, life was going on without any shortages. Now, it was not easy for

him to bear the burden of three more lives. But there was no way out. And so he had come to discuss the matter with his daughter.

'Did Chikkappa ask you to come here? I had told him that there was no problem till summer. It will do if we talk about it when you come down during the approaching holidays. Why did he so hastily write a letter to you?' Nagaveni asked. Vasudevayya laughed. 'Child, you have no sense. With the baby, the grandmother and the mother-in-law, how can you cultivate land on lease and live? If your mother-in-law can stay at her daughter's, I can take you both home. Otherwise, Ajji can stay here with your uncle. The child and you can come to Mangalore. If you had come away when I called you, there would have been no problem.'

Nagaveni's face fell. It was obvious from her father's words that he was unwilling to bear the burden of looking after Sathyabhamé. Doddatté had made it clear in her various conversations that she would beg and live there and die in the courtyard of her Rama's house. 'I have left my father's family and come here. Should I be scared of difficulties and seek the shelter of my parents' home, leaving this nest in which all had lived together? And leaving the two old women as well?' Nagaveni asked herself. Her father's advice was not taken. She cooked for her father, served him, and told him that she would tell him everything when he came down in summer. Her father looked at her. 'Look at the child. It's just two years old. It will need another twenty years at least to stand on its own feet. Think about it before you speak,' he said, pointing to the child. She knew that Doddatté would find it difficult to adjust to any other house at her age. Her uncle's wife was quite hard. Her selfishness might crush her husband's generosity. Above all, there was her self-respect. They had lived here all this time. Why should she leave the shelter now? And so she told him not to do anything for the moment.

'I shall go home, talk to Narayana and come back tomorrow. I can't leave Mangalore during the court sessions. Make preparations for leaving. I will instruct you tomorrow,' he said and left. Nagaveni and Sarasothi talked for long. 'Where

should your mother-in-law stay? She has gone to her daughter's place for the time being. Won't she get back tomorrow? Or, shouldn't she come back? Should she go to her father's place? Forget about me. I can't lie around in someone else's house waiting for the moment of death,' Sarasothi said. She narrated the story of a friend who had stayed with a relative, been an object of ridicule for everyone, and died eventually at the end of a ruined life. Nagaveni said nothing. It was late at night. She couldn't sleep and sat up in bed. She saw a face before her sleeping peacefully. She smiled at it. The next moment, her eyes filled with tears. 'Rama, they will look after you. They will come in the morning and take you with them,' she said, and stroked the child's body.

She got out of bed, went near Doddatté's feet and touched them. Getting up quietly, she stepped into the courtyard. A cool breeze was blowing. Thousands of stars peeped out from above . She chanted 'Rama, Rama' and stepped out of the house. She kept walking on the sand bank and arrived at the flat land to the west. Not stopping there, she went on towards the sea.

The sea water, where she came every new moon day to bathe, was receding with the tide that night. Deciding to go to the estuary, she went along the beach southwards. Every step she took carried her body along and she walked without fear. She wasn't distracted by the waves of the sea. They only enhanced her dazed state of mind like a lullaby does for one who is dozing. Amidst all that, a fox cried out 'hukko.' It had come to hunt for crabs. Perhaps it couldn't tolerate outsiders stepping into its territory.

Nagaveni turned towards the direction where the sound had come from and went ahead as if nothing had happened. Very soon, the estuary appeared in front of her. The sand beach, spread out like a mat, suddenly came to an end, meeting the river. The river flowed laughingly towards the sea, pushing back the sand as if it didn't need it.

It seemed to Nagaveni that she had reached the end of her journey. Her mind sprang towards her child. It flowed

once towards the blind and old Doddatté. She remembered her love which had lighted up her days until then. 'Wouldn't she forgive this misdeed of mine?' she asked herself in agony.

She looked up at the sky. The stars stared back at her, unblinking. Once again her meditation was broken, not by the cry of a fox, but of a dog, which had seen her standing like a shadow at some distance! It started barking and was followed by voices of men. She felt as if someone was approaching her. The dog appeared to come straight towards her, barking all the while. Realising that she could not wait any longer, she jumped into the waters of the estuary.

Alarmed at the way the dog ran, two men came running as well. As they were coming with baskets to catch crabs, the dog had seen her standing by the estuary and barked. They saw a black body tossing up and down in the water. One of them jumped into the water, thinking that the dog had scared someone and the person had panicked. The man on the bank stood waiting. In the fight between the sea and the river, the wrangling between the waves above and those below, Nagaveni had fainted and was being tossed about. The fisherman caught hold of her saree and pulled her. Eventually, the man on the bank pulled them both up. Seeing the dog barking still, they shooed it away angrily. All this had been done at lightning speed. Nagaveni opened her eyes within a few minutes of their concerned attention. They were still anxious and called the people in the coconut grove nearby. She was taken there and a lamp was lit. An old fisherwoman living there thought that she had seen the girl somewhere. She thought and thought before asking, 'Aren't you Aithala's daughter-in-law?'

Nagaveni wept aloud, acknowledging her identity. 'Take me back to where you found me. Let me die in peace,' she sobbed.

Over in Aithala's house, the child woke up and cried for its mother. Sarasothi couldn't hear Nagaveni's voice. 'Sleep, child. Amma may be fast asleep,' she said, trying to pat him back to sleep. The child's crying became stronger. 'Nagu, Nagu,' Sarasothi called out loudly. Realising that she hadn't woken

up, she called again. 'Where have you gone, Nagu? Rama is calling you,' she said. Eventually, she tried to console the child in many ways. 'Why did she get up so early? To sweep up dry leaves? To wash pots and pans?' she wondered. If she was washing up the leaves, she would be by the edge of the river. She should have heard her. Probably, not knowing the time, she might have gone to the honné trees to sweep up the leaves. By the time dawn broke, someone could be heard calling, 'Amma, Amma,' outside. Before Sarasothi could ask who it was and what they wanted, Nagaveni came into the house, head bent. 'Ajjamma, what is this? Your daughter-in-law had gone in the middle of the night to jump into the river. Luckily, some men had gone there to catch crabs and her life was saved,' said the people who had come. Alarmed, Sarasothi wept and asked Nagu about what she had done. 'You have saved my child. Poor soul, what could she do if God gave her such distress?' Sarasothi described their predicament to the people who had brought Nagaveni. They went away and Sarasothi came in. 'Did you do all this? This child of yours sobbed and sobbed because it couldn't see you. Is it fair on your part to leave it? Are we the only people in the world who are suffering? Aren't there many who are suffering a thousand times more?' Sarasothi comforted Nagaveni.

A little after the sun rose, Nagaveni's father came back. 'There will be no problem in Airodi. All of you should come home with me today itself. Let Nagaveni come with me to Mangalore.' Nagaveni heard those words and, unable to stand there, went into the cowshed. She untethered the cattle and took them out. The father watched her, hoping that she would talk to him. Even as he was wondering why she was acting in that manner, Sarasothi said, 'Don't worry about me. Sathyabhamé and I can live here somehow. You take the responsibility of looking after her and your grandson. Last night she had gone to the estuary to jump in.' She described everything she had heard and Vasudevayya's worries were doubled. 'Ayyo! How could life treat her like this? We brought her up like a flower. It is as if we flung it out afterwards in the midday sun.' Calling her name, he went to look for her. As the story he had heard was still simmering in his mind, he

went straight to the seaside and took the path to the estuary. He asked someone he met whether he had seen his daughter — Rama Aithala's daughter-in-law — anywhere in the area. 'Why? She was sitting behind the house grazing the cattle,' came the reply.

'Behind the house?'

'Yes, near the honné grove. I have just seen her there,' said a man.

Vasudevayya hastened back home. Nagaveni was sitting behind the house in the shade of the honné trees with her head in her hands. Two cows were grazing right there. She didn't get up even though he approached her. She was staring at her toe-rings. 'My child, didn't you like what I said? Are you angry or upset? Why did you do such a thing last night? Or was it just your Doddatté's imagination?' He spoke to her sharply, yet softly. Nagaveni looked up at her father's face. Tears rolled down her cheeks. 'You want me to go to your house. But who does Doddatté have? Should the two old women be under the obligation of others at this age? Particularly Doddatté, who wants to breathe her last in this very courtyard.'

'What can I do? Let me think. Perhaps something can be done. But what can I do, if you are determined to stay here?'

'They won't come there. I won't either, as long as they are alive.'

'What happens to your child? And you?'

'We shall stay here whatever happens. We shall carry on, working in the fields we have got on lease. Am I not capable of bringing up one child? If I am alive and my husband is alive, he shall see that, whoever might have abandoned me, I never abandoned Rama Aithala's grandson. My son will see that his mother never let him stretch out his hand for other people's castaway food. That is enough for me.'

'If your mind is this strong, why did you attempt what you did last night?'

'Because I thought you may take me away from Doddatté. Because, seeing my plight, she will tell me, just do what he says. She claims she can be here by herself. Can't see, can't walk and she is almost seventy-five. "Can't I stay here? Death is the same for all. One can live, eating grass."'

On the one hand, Vasudevayya's mind surged with pride for his daughter. He wished she had been born a boy. On the other hand, all the compassion within him burst forth and flowed like the water in a breached canal.

'So be it, my child. God will not forsake someone like you. You stay with them. But does it have to be here, like this? We have a place beyond the river. There is no problem about a house either. Where is the joy in working on someone else's land? Moreover, what do you gain by paying money to have it cultivated?'

'If I stay back, it will be only here. If the people who have bought the house are not happy with us staying here, there is a plot of government land on the beach on the other side. We will build a hut there and live in it. Someday, my husband may come looking for us. Let him feel happy looking at the state he has brought his son to.'

Her mind was racing in two directions. Her affection and respect for the elders at home was as strong as the anger she nursed against her husband who had put her in such a plight through deceit. A decision simmered within her to live on, wearing out her nerves if need be, to show that they had not perished despite her husband having abandoned her.

Vasudevayya brought his daughter back to the house. 'Sarasothamma, it appears as though God has welded the two of you together. I shall neither sever the bond nor try to melt it. But I shall say one thing: if you should need anything at all some day, please ask us first before asking any outsider. If I am not around, Narayana is here. Swear you will do so.'

Pressured by his daughter, he stayed for lunch. When he ate, he felt as if his grandson was being deprived of a mouthful of food. He couldn't carry on eating. In between two

morsels, he said, 'Sarasothamma, what is this life? Why did God create it?' Such sadness had not been aroused in him till then. Now that it had appeared, it never left him till the end.

He went home. A few days after he left, Sathyabhamé came home full of anxiety. She had heard about everything from Sarasothi. She felt that her daughter-in-law was an angel. She was ashamed to have gone to her daughter's in a hurry because she found no peace at home. 'What is the use of people like us living? From the day Nagaveni came back from Mangalore, she has not gone to her father's house. Her parents have come and seen her here, but she has never gone to Airodi for even a night. Her commitment will not go in vain. All our tears may provide at least a moment's joy to the grandson,' she thought.

Rama was two years old and Yugadi arrived as well. It was a year since Lachcha had disappeared after cheating everyone. Within that year Aithala's family had become labourers working on their own land. Nagaveni sent for Soora and spoke of her predicament. 'Soora, God has done all this. It's true that you are ageing. You have children who can work. If you can ask them to cultivate a small area of our land, we hope to live on the produce.' Sarasothi who was sitting in the yard, added, 'Soora, do you see the games that God plays?' Soora was after all one who had worked for them. He couldn't bear to see the difficulties they were going through and had tears in his eyes as well. 'My children are not so wretched. I don't think they will say no if you ask them to work on your field,' he said. 'You will not be cheated of money, Soora. It is enough if two men come at harvest time to stop everything from getting washed away during the latter half of the rainy season,' Nagaveni said. Soora walked back home leaning on his stick. In accordance with his instructions, Sarasothamma's three patches were prepared for cultivation even before the rainy season started. It rained a couple of times in the summer and the seeds that had been sown sprouted. Nagaveni and Sathyabhamé took turns to carry Rama while guarding the seedbeds so that they wouldn't be destroyed by the hens running around.

The glare of the sun grew strong. White cloud-balls rolled from the western skies to the ghats in the east. Though they alarmed people who were celebrating weddings and thread ceremonies in the village, a few rain drops fell and people sweated it out to scoop up water in water-baskets. The seedlings turned green and grew. Sarasothi praised God saying that they would have spent all their money if they had had to pay for watering. God had saved them. The next day, she heard Rama crying. 'Sathya,' she said, 'Make something for the child to munch in the rainy season. Rice happala at least, if nothing else.' Nagaveni interrupted her. 'How can we take away rice for pounding to make happala? We don't know how much we shall need to give for planting, weeding and harvesting.' Sarasothi laughed. 'Each one of us shall fast one day, if we run short because we have used some rice for the sake of the child's happala.' Nagaveni felt ashamed. However, she said to herself that whatever rice remained should be guarded like a pot full of treasure. 'We shall make happala with something else,' she said. Whatever the village lacked, there was no dearth of cashewnut trees. Nó one would touch the fruits. She made sandigé and happala from them. She told her mother-in-law that she hoped they wouldn't go stale with the onset of rain. Sathyabhamé remembered her daughter's house. There would be no problem if a couple of raw jack-fruits could be brought from there. But Nagaveni said it was no child's play to bring them all the way. Sarasothi told them the story of her bringing raw mangoes to make pickle from a distant place in her youth. 'Anything can be done if one has your will and courage,' Sathyabhamé said. But her grandson shouldn't be deprived of his baby food. He shouldn't bother his mother when hungry. So, she herself went off to Mandarthi, saying she would be back in a couple of days. A few days passed and Sathyabhamé came back from her daughter's. Subbi's son, Sathya, came behind her with a sack on his head. She had a cloth bundle on her head, too. Sathyabhamé's joy at her own efforts was indescribable. 'Koosanna, your cousin is here. See, he has brought you happala.' Sathyabhamé couldn't call him by name as it was her husband's name as well. Though Rama didn't know why he was Koosanna for her, he understood

the meaning of the word happala. Sathyabhamé had stayed on in Mandarthi, had the fruit plucked, boiled and rolled thin, and brought it back. Along with it, a gift from his aunt of sweet potato and kesuvé happala had arrived as well. Subbi's son went back after staying for a couple of days. Rain-bearing wind blew as if it was following him home.

The rainy season started much earlier than in the previous years. The tanks and fields were filled with the orchestra of croaking frogs. The roar of the sea became very strong. 'Maybe, God Varuna wants to swallow the entire beach at one roar,' said Sarasothi. The seedlings danced to the rhythm of the rain. Nagaveni, Sathyabhamé, Soora's children and grandchildren helped in the transplanting. Their fields turned green in three days. The only thing Nagaveni didn't like very much was the fact that Soora's family hadn't come over to collect their payment. The previous month's labour in getting the field ready hadn't been paid for. Nothing had been paid for what they were doing now. It would be quite a tidy sum. She sent for Soora three times, not wishing to be under his obligation just for the sake of a few measures of rice. But Soora had given orders to his children. 'Amma has given us pickles and much else before this and looked after us. When Aithala was alive, people who had not grown enough rice and thus were not able to give him his due called him a "fretful type." But where I was concerned, he would say that it was all right and that I could give it to him the year after. When such people are in poverty, we don't want their money, even if they want to give it to us.' So, Sathyabhamé's messages were futile. 'Soora, are you going to take the rice only after it gets damp and worm-ridden?' she asked. 'Amma, we have rice at home. You keep it for us,' he said. Nagaveni didn't understand what he meant. She thought he might come back for money after weeding the next day.

Time for planting was over. Nagaveni was busy with the daily chores in the house. If she had any spare time, she would go and pull out weeds in the field. If there was nothing else to do, she would go to the plains to graze the cattle. When there was a break in the rains, she would take Rama

along. Though he didn't appear to be a strong child, he had learnt to lisp and walk around. His talk made the elders happy. His mother wanted to take him around with her whenever she was free. On days when there was a respite from the rain, she would wait for the sun to go down and saunter out with the child in her arms. As soon as he got onto the beach, he would point at the sea and ask her what was shining out there. If she said it was the sea, he would ask her what a sea was. 'It is a big tank,' his mother would say with a smile. 'Let's see if there is a Kolé flower there,' he would say, and not let go until he was taken near the sea. Nagaveni was scared to take him to the edge of the water. But the child would long to see and touch the waves that came rolling over hurriedly to kiss the sandy beach. When he saw them, his joy was greater than the joy of the foam. So, he would insist on staying back even when it was time to go home. He had to be taken to the sea once in four days at least. When she lay down in the night, he would hear the loud roar of the sea and ask whose roar it was. If his mother told him that it was the sea, he would ask why it roared. What did it want? If he was bored or upset, it was enough to say, 'Ramanna, come, let us watch the sea.' It wasn't a distant journey. When the rain held back, it was enough to just walk a hundred yards from home.

Rama had no shortage of snacks. There was happala and sandigé which his grandmother had brought from Mandarthi. He was content if one happala was roasted and given to him. He would spend the rest of the time talking to his grandmother or Sarasothi.

The rainy season was over. Mahalaya Amavasyé, the new moon day, arrived. It was the day the villagers bathed in the sea. It was the day when elders of the family who had passed away were given offerings. Sarasothi wanted to bathe in the sea. She hadn't been there since she had come back from Kashi. She kept quiet, realising that she wouldn't be able to walk the distance and take a dip in the water. Suddenly she said, 'How many days do I have? Nagu, I would like to go and bathe in the sea.' Nagaveni asked her if she could walk all the way. 'Of course, I can. I know I can't see. Take me by

the hand and help me take a dip. I shall stand by the side of water and take a dip in salt water. My heart says that this is the new moon day of Pitru Paksha and I would do well to take a dip in the sea. I don't need a temple or holy water. Do this much for me today,' Sarasothi said.

That morning she first had a bath at home. She went without anyone's help to where they kept their God and bowed in worship. 'Sathya, who will take me? You or Nagaveni? It's better if it's you. Let's stop here and there. My legs aren't strong enough to keep on walking. When I take a dip, maybe Upadhyaya's wife could hold my hand. The two of you can help me take a dip. Let Nagaveni stay at home and look after Rama.'

Would Rama stay at home? He said that he wanted to go to the sea. 'You stay with me. Won't I be scared to stay all by myself?' said his mother. 'Ajji will be scared. I must go with her,' he said. And so, on his insistence, Nagaveni had to take him. Everybody left together. Rama held Ajji's hand and said that he would escort her. Everyone laughed. Sarasothi held Sathyabhamé's hand for support and walked to the seashore. 'I remember everything, Sathya. As long as Parothi was alive, I never missed bathing in the sea on the new moon day.... She died on a new moon day, didn't she?' she asked as she walked on. Parothi's memory had brought tears to her eyes. They all reached the seashore. There were hundreds of people on the beach. Some had already bathed while some others were still bathing. Others were engrossed in offering Thila Tharpana, libation with sesame seeds, to the dead. Rama looked that way and said, 'Amma, I will do the same.' Making mud balls, he chanted 'Om wa, om wa' imitating the people around him. Ajji laughed, listening to his chanting. 'Sathya, Anna's way of life has found its completion in this boy. Look. If he was here, he would have recited the sacred verses now,' she said.

Preparation for the bath went ahead. Rama insisted on bathing as well. Eventually, Sathyabhamé and Nagaveni held his hand and dipped him in water. Though the child's eyes smarted with salt water, he laughed at the waves hitting him.

'I want more. Bathing is so good. I want more, some more,' he begged. Rama's bath, however, had to come to an end. They looked for Subraya Upadhyaya's wife so that Doddatté wouldn't feel tired having to go back home in the sun. She was talking to an old friend of hers. As Nagaveni stood holding Rama's hand, Sathyabhamé and Upadhyaya's wife held Sarasothi against the rolling waves and thus she had her dip in the salt water. Then she took a little money from Nagaveni and gave it to a brahmin as charity. Sathyabhamé did likewise.

'Let's go home,' said Sathya. They walked home together facing the east. The tiredness she might have felt earlier seemed to have come back to Sarasothi. However, she stopped here and there, talking to Upadhyaya's wife, and reached home. When they reached the courtyard, she told Nagaveni, 'I'm too tired. Give me something to drink.' Nagaveni made her sit and went in to prepare the drink. Rama said he would give it to Sarasothi and she agreed. She seemed to be in great agony and lay down right there. When the drink arrived, she let Rama help her. She felt a little stronger. 'Child, be good. Bring a good name to the family and your mother,' she blessed him and smiled. 'Somehow, I feel like drinking a ladleful of Bhagirathi water we brought from Kashi.' she said. Sathyabhamé brought the tiny pot and peeled off the wax seal on top. 'Shall I pour it into your mouth?' she asked.

'Ajji,' said Rama, 'I want to pour the water into your mouth.' 'Of course. You alone should,' Sarasothi said.

Nagaveni who had prepared the drink for Doddatté was perturbed. She ran to Soora's house in anxiety and sent people to fetch her uncle. When she came back, Rama was putting water into his Ajji's mouth. Upadhyaya's wife was also anxious when she took a look at Sarasothi's face. 'It would have been better if some men were around. Sarasothi seems to be in great pain,' she said. Sarasothi heard those words. 'Isn't my Rama a man?' the old woman said with a smile.

Those were her last words. She lay down exhausted and in some pain. In a few moments, her body went stiff. Nagaveni started crying. 'I knew it already when she asked if it wasn't

the new moon day when Parothi died. Who knows? She might have called Doddatté over there.'

Rama went near Ajji and shook her over and over again. He talked to her. Unable to keep watching what he was doing, Nagaveni picked him up and went outside. 'She could choose to die when she wanted. Death came to her when she called. She wasn't like us, the sinners,' she said to Narayanappa who had arrived.

~20~

Navarathri was over and the village fields ripened. The roar of the sea subsided and fishermen got ready to cast their nets. Sailing boats started arriving from other places to the Hangarakatté estuary. Rama was getting bored at home and would force his mother to take him out. He longed for Sarasothi for a few days and kept calling 'Ajji, Ajji.' To lift him out of his gloom, Nagaveni would take him to the beach and seashore every evening. One day they went to the coconut grove that had once been theirs. It had been bought from Aithu Poojari by the child's grandfather and had now changed hands. Still, she carried Rama there because she wanted to see it. It was like the garden of heaven. The coconut trees were bent with the weight of bunches. She had been there once before with Sathyabhamé, she remembered. 'We were not fated to own it. Otherwise, this would have been yours,' she said to Rama. He pointed to the coconuts at the top and said he wanted them. She had to pacify him saying it was not theirs, and they went back home.

The day for Sarasothi's obsequies approached. Her husband's relatives from Subbi's house came for the rites. Sathyabhamé's son-in-law felt sorry for the state the house was in. 'After Appa's death, even our house was divided into three parts. However, the property stayed with us, the

brothers. But when I look at the plight here I feel too bad,' he said. 'How one feels about it – can it make a difference?' said Nagaveni. People who had come for the obsequies went back one by one. As they left, a few of them placed a coin in Rama's hand and he asked, 'Amma, what's this? What's this for?' Sathyabhamé thought of her penury and said, 'Child, it makes things happen.' Nagaveni smiled. 'Not really. They gave it to you to play with,' she said. 'Make me a cart with it,' he asked. She gave him a spindle his grandfather had used to make the sacred thread. Rama took it with joy and spent time playing with it.

Could one forget daily meals amidst all the rites connected with death? Could one forget that the crops in the fields had ripened? If one was indifferent for a few days, the king of clouds would get angry and snatch back what he had granted.

It was harvest time. Neither Sathyabhamé nor Nagaveni had held a sickle before. They had to decide whether they should hold it and work along with the labourers or do it themselves. They could not call Soora for he hadn't even taken the paddy for the work done before. Neither had he come to ask for it. They thought that if they could complete harvesting with the help of his family, they could do the threshing themselves. Soora finished the job even before he had completed his own, and brought home the hay. Soora's children had grown up and were not hesitant to work. It wasn't too much for Soora when he had able-bodied sons and the daughters-in-law at home. Threshing the hay that had arrived in the yard was done by mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Rama too came forward to join the beating game, and the paddy heap entered the verandah. Nagaveni thought that what was owed to Soora should be settled. She calculated how many workers there were and what payment had to be made. She measured rice accordingly and set it aside in a separate heap. Soora was sent for and he came, not knowing why. 'Soora, this paddy is for the work you have done. If you leave it with me, what will I do if nothing remains at the end?' she said, pointing to the paddy heap. Soora said, 'Amma, I don't want any wages this year. We lose nothing if a few of us have come to this house

and worked for nothing.' 'I don't want to be obliged to anyone, Soora. Even when my father asked me to go home with him, I didn't. Do you now want me to be obliged to you?' she asked, and went into the house after speaking those words without waiting to know how he felt.

Soora was anguished listening to what she had said. Didn't he know that nothing would be left of what they had grown after giving the owner what was his due? But Nagaveni had sounded firm in what she had said. Deciding not to hurt her, he sent one of his daughters-in-law there and had the paddy brought home.

Nagaveni's mind was at ease. They started measuring the paddy. They had gathered twenty measures. After giving away the dues, they would be left with ten. Would it be possible to run the household with that much? Wouldn't they also have to buy groceries and clothes? If they sowed harvest seed in the small field and toiled to water it, they could get three or four measures of rice. They got the soil ready for sowing. Ploughing was the only task for Soora. There was no way out but to do the rest of the work themselves. They came to the conclusion that it was a great tribulation to cultivate land that was taken on lease. From then on, the whole day would be spent carrying ash, irrigating the field and growing vegetables. They had no courage to call anyone for pounding the paddy. In between, they planted grains as well, like sesame, avaré and huruli.

Sowing was over. Then began the job of sweeping dry leaves at the back, whenever they found time. Along with boiling gruel for the cattle, paddy had to be boiled and dried, and pounded little by little. Nagaveni had never held a pestle in her hands before. However, she had used one to make beaten rice a couple of times, and knew what to do. When she started doing it everyday, her hands became rough and her shoulders ached. Her arms swelled up and caused distress. But, didn't life have to go on? It was through toil that the next day could be faced. Watching Rama imitating everything the women did, Nagaveni forgot all her own worries and wondered if the child had to grow up amidst pestles and threshing cots

and depending upon them as well. 'If the child has the sacred thread ceremony performed, he can follow the profession the family had forgotten. If he studies a few Ashtakas, he may not have to face undue hardship in life like us. He can bring rice or coconut home with honour. As long as my husband was alive, we saw nothing. Now, we notice things,' Sathyabhamé said. 'Who knows what He has written on his forehead?' said Nagaveni. 'Who knows whether he will study like his uncle and become a big man, or a priest like my father-in-law, or run a hotel like Sheena Mayya's Narasimha, or follow a path of his own? Everything is as God wills. Who knows? They sent my husband to become a lawyer. But what did he do? He went away to run a hotel.' Nagaveni was not a pessimist but hesitated to forecast her son's future.

The mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law did not neglect the child because of hardship during cultivation. His fourth year drew near. When he turned five, he could be put into school near their village.

Shankara Aii's matha had vanished when a school arrived. There was no news of him either, apart from the fact that he spent most of his time farming and explaining the meaning of Yakshagana, and the rest in boasting about himself. Until he was ready for school, Rama had to be looked after like a child. He would be shown the sea, taken to where the cattle were grazing and also to the fairs in other villages. He was thrilled with these outings. The strange shells from the sea and the honné pods were his playthings. If there was an open air drama staged in the village and if the sound of drums was heard, he would beg to be taken to where 'tamatama' was going on. Once in a while, fishermen with big nets would invite the troupe from Mandarthi and Rama found great pleasure in their performances. He would not remain still unless he was taken there for at least a short while. He would be told to sleep with the promise of being taken there in the morning when painted actors would appear on the stage. Likewise, after his night of sleep, at daybreak, Sathyabhamé would take him there. If he insisted on going too close to the stage, she would tell him that there was a melee and it was

'unclean' to mix with the people, thereby holding on to her own ideas of purity and impurity. Eventually, in order to satisfy him, she would take him to the make-up room after all the people had left. 'See, that's Ravana, this is Bheema,' she would explain. After coming home, Rama would start drumming on the pots and pans and create a commotion. He would shout as the actors did. He would stamp about all over the yard. If he was told that he shouldn't do it because he didn't belong to the troupe, he would say he was Upralli Shesha who played the part of Ravana, or Pandeshwara who played Arjuna. He could recognise all the famous actors.

One day, there was a performance in the presence of the village deity. Rama insisted on going to the show that night. Sathyabhamé pacified him and took him there very early in the morning, She stood on a sand bank carrying him and showed him the performance. He had never before liked a show as much as the one he saw that day. He could see the men acting and dancing from very near the stage. When she held him up, his feet would dance to the beat of the drums. The grandmother must have retrieved her childhood, watching the enthusiasm of the child.

They saw the performance and went back home. On the way, Sathyabhamé touched the child's head and it was covered with dew. She felt apprehensive about not having realised that the child's head was not covered. Her mind went back to something that had happened in the distant past. Parothi had carried Lachcha to the huruli field. He had fever when they came back, and she herself had hurt Parothi with accusatory words she had spoken in anxiety. She remembered the whole incident and came home with Rama. Her eyes were filled with tears. She wasn't even aware that Rama had nodded off on her shoulders. When she came into the house, Sathyabhamé's face was as small as an unripe mango. Nagaveni saw her. 'Atté, did Rama sleep? Did he see the show? This boy is crazy about plays,' she said. Sathyabhamé felt like a guilty person. 'Nagaveni, I don't know what you will say. The child got wet with the dew. I don't know where my senses were or where I was.' 'What happens if there is a little dew? Why should you

be so worried about it?' asked Nagaveni as she took the child from her mother-in-law. 'I was afraid he might get fever.' 'It's only fever that he'll get. Nothing else,' said Nagaveni. Sathyabhamé's memory surged once more and she told the story from the past. 'Atté, she and Sarasothi should have been born twins. No two souls could have lived in such harmony otherwise,' said Nagaveni.

Rama's mother put him to sleep on the mat. They got busy with household work and Rama continued to sleep. It was almost afternoon and, engrossed in their work as they were, neither of the two women remembered to wake him up. Nagaveni finished her work in the cowshed, bathed and came in. Before she went into the kitchen, she felt like stroking the child's body. His face was hot. 'I am imagining things,' she thought. She touched the child's body and it was warm. She thought that the story her mother-in-law had told her had made her imagine things, and said nothing. She lit the stove and put water on the boil. 'Perhaps the child has a touch of the wind; or, it might have been someone's evil eye,' she told herself. She stuck the handle of a ladle in the fire and when it became red hot, she put it in water and held it near the child's face. Steam rose up in the air and the child opened his eyes because of the heat. 'Amma, what are you doing?' he asked. 'I am driving away the evil eye,' she said.

'What is an evil eye?'

'I'll tell you later. You have fever. Just lie down.'

She went in, brought some salt and pepper, waved them around the child's face and put them in the fire. She put some rice in the boiling water and went to get some sambaraballi from Upadhyaya's house without letting her mother-in-law know. It was to be the medicine for the child's cold.

When she left, Rama was looking at her from where she lay. 'Amma, Amma,' he called again and again. He was hungry as well. Hearing him whimper, Sathyabhamé came running. Her heart missed a beat when she saw his face. When she went near and touched him, she drew back her hands. 'Has what I feared happened?' she asked herself and bit her lip. Her

heart started beating fast and she could say nothing. 'Ajji, where is Amma? I am hungry,' Rama said. She picked him up and went to the kitchen. Each grain of rice was jumping about in the water. 'I shall give you some gruel as soon as the rice boils,' she said. By then, Sathyabhamé's courage had deserted her and she started crying. 'Ajji, why are you crying?' the tired-looking child asked. But what could she say? Nagaveni arrived at that moment with the sambaraballi leaves in her hands. She saw her mother-in-law crying with her lips protruding like a simpleton's.

'Atté, what's the matter with you? Whatever will happen if the child's body is a little warm? I have done things to ward off the evil eye. I have brought the sambaraballi creeper and leaves. Won't the fever subside if I boil them and apply a little juice on his forehead?' Rama asked why his grandmother was crying. Nagaveni told him that it must have been something that got into her eye. 'Atté, you're worse than the child,' Nagaveni said. 'No, what I did in the past has come now to face me,' Sathyabhamé said.

Nagaveni picked up the child and, not letting him stay close to her mother-in-law, brought him near the stove. 'Gruel will be ready soon. I shall cool it and give it to you,' she said, and started preparing the medicine for him. He sat warming himself while the mother drained the rice. Putting some rice into the gruel, she boiled it again, sprinkled salt crystals into it, and fed him. Pickles were over and there was neither curds nor buttermilk at home. Her sweet words were there for him to feast on, anyway. After lunch, Rama asked her if he could sleep on her lap. She put him there. 'Amma,' he said, 'Yesterday, Bandi Bheema ate mandakki but didn't give me any.' 'The chariot festival at Saligrama will begin in a week and I will get you mandakki,' his mother reassured him. Mother and child talked for a while before Rama fell asleep. She put him back on the mat, covered him with a saree and came away.

Rice was made and Nagaveni wondered what she could prepare to go with it. There were no vegetables. She squeezed some tamarind juice, heated it, and added some salt and pepper.

She wanted to take the clear water from the top to make saaru, but it had gone cold and thick. With just that for lunch, she asked her mother-in-law if she had had her bath. Sathyabhamé had already bathed in her tears. When she came in, they both sat down for lunch. Nagaveni watched her mother-in-law who appeared to be forcing every morsel of food down her throat. She got angry. 'Atté, don't be foolish. Nothing will happen to my child. Doddatté has blessed him and gone. Nothing will happen to him because the merit of her good life will protect him. Please eat without worrying,' she said.

The meal was over. Caught in her own memories, Sathyabhamé didn't get up from the mat. The child started sweating in the evening. 'Thank God,' Sathyabhamé exclaimed.

The Saligrama fair would be held the following Monday. Nagaveni had gone there with her husband when she was pregnant. Memories came to her. Along with the child, she too longed for mandakki. She made up her mind to take him there and fulfil his desire. But going to the fair was not a simple affair. Wouldn't one need an anna in cash at least? Even though coconut could be taken from home, one would need to buy bananas and offer three paise to God and have a little cash left over for mandakki. All that with just one anna? Where could she get the money from? She discussed the matter with her mother-in-law. 'I had vowed to offer fruits and coconut if the child's fever left him. God heard me, granted me a favour, and saved my honour. I too shall come for the chariot procession. Let us sell at least a seer of rice to have money enough to spend there,' she said.

The day of the chariot procession arrived. The whole village set out towards Saligrama. Both women decided to start very early in the morning. An old dhoti was tied round the child's waist. Nagaveni saw her uncle there as soon as they reached. She felt hesitant to meet him. She told her mother-in-law that they would approach it from another side and went around the sanctum sanctorum amidst the milling crowd. How could she pretend not to have seen him when he found them offering a coconut and came and stood before them? Narayanappa called Nagaveni. She had become

emaciated in that one year. It was obvious to anyone. She was wearing an old saree. It was the day when the whole village would turn up in new sarees and new clothes. Her child was wearing a torn dhoti. She answered him when he called. A dialogue of pity and shyness went on between their two pairs of eyes. Eventually, not being able to converse in the crowd, they kept quiet. Narayanappa called Rama and carried him. He said he would show him the fair and took him to the pavement clothes shop. He bought a long, striped shirt and put it on the child. When Rama asked if it was for him, Narayanappa said yes. Rama snatched back the torn dhoti, saying he wanted it. Then he was taken to Navada's hotel and Narayanappa bought him a sugar stick. 'You are good,' said Rama, raising Narayanappa's chin. Feeling shy, the latter said it was nothing, kept an anna in the child's pocket and left him with his mother.

Then he invited them all to come to Airodi and go back to Kodi in the evening. 'The cows are there,' said Nagaveni. 'I shall go back and look after them. Let the child go to Airodi,' said Sathyabhamé. Nagaveni could say nothing, though she was not eager to go. But her uncle's insistence and affection and her feeling that she shouldn't come in the way of her child eating a festive meal with payasa made her agree to the proposal. 'You could have come too,' said Narayanappa to Sathyabhamé. 'I have just tied them up in the cowshed with a bundle of hay. They can't be kept starving, poor things,' she replied.

Finding no other way to change her mind, Narayanappa started off home with Nagaveni and Rama following him. 'How long will you carry the child? My arms won't wear out if I do,' said Narayanappa. 'No, let him walk till Chempi,' said the child's mother. 'What about reaching home?' her uncle laughed. They reached Airodi around midday. Nagaveni had last stepped into the house during Sarasothi's Kashi yatré and her appearance seemed strange to the people in the house. There she was offered the greatest hospitality. Everyone spoke to Rama with great sympathy. There was kadubu and payasa to eat. As he sat eating with his mother, Rama whispered into

her ears and asked why she didn't make such things at home. 'We shall make them,' she said and a tear fell from her eye into the payasa. She used her saree to wipe her eyes. They sat talking after lunch. Narayanappa's family had decided to go to the chariot procession in the evening. 'Nagu, you will be staying here tonight, won't you? If you are, we won't go. We shall stay back,' they said. She insisted on going home because her mother-in-law would be alone. She asked Rama if they could go home and he said yes. Narayanappa's wife, who was generally of a hard nature, felt great pity for Nagaveni. She spoke to her niece. 'Nagu, you are adamant. There is no use telling you. Will you leave the child here for a few days?' she asked. 'How can I? Who else do I have?' Nagaveni asked in reply.

She started back with her child. Narayanappa went with them up to the river bank. For the rest of the day, his family talked about Nagaveni.

Rama was playing in the yard that evening. Suddenly, he remembered the fair. 'Amma, was mandakki there at the fair?' he asked. Nagaveni hadn't forgotten but hadn't wanted to buy it in front of her uncle. Her face fell. 'Curse my memory!' she said. But, Sathyabhamé hadn't forgotten. 'I have bought it,' she said, placing a handful before him after wiping the floor clean. 'There is some left. Save it for tomorrow,' she said and Rama agreed and started eating mandakki grain by grain. After eating, he wandered around with the elders, as usual, to the tank, well and cowshed.

That night Nagaveni slept with her child. She wanted to take off his shirt at bedtime but he wouldn't agree to it saying that it was beautiful and it could stay on for the night. When she stroked his body in the night, the shirt would hinder the movement of her hand. The touch of the shirt brought her the memory of their plight and that of her journey to the chariot procession with her husband when she was pregnant.

Though the festival was over, talk about it wasn't. The day all the talk was exhausted, talk of something totally different entered the village. News came that there was a rain

of deaths in Kodi, Airodi, Manooru, far away Udupi and some other places they had only heard of. It was a kind of fever that was spreading fast and wiping away whole families. Frightening news from everywhere. 'Is it true, Atté?' asked Nagaveni. 'Is it true, Soora?' asked Sathyabhamé. 'Is it true, Odathi?' asked Soora. They asked one another. What sort of fever, what disease was this? 'It is called *ganagaddige,*' someone said. Nagaveni hadn't heard of it before. 'This is just one story made up by over-anxious women who lost their husbands this year,' they said, and tried to laugh it off.

Not even two days after they had laughed at it, they heard that Soora was bedridden. The news came from his daughter-in-law who had come to fetch water. That very evening, it came to be known that she too had fallen ill. Then it was said that everyone in Soora's house had taken to bed. Sathyabhamé couldn't believe anything, so, she went there to see for herself. Soora's funeral procession had just then started. They were saying that his eldest daughter-in-law might not survive either. Scared and anxious, Sathyabhamé ran home. 'Is there anything as peculiar as this? Even delirium appears only after a fortnight of fever. How can one get fever today and die tomorrow?' she asked with fear.

When morning broke the next day, Sathyabhamé's body was burning with fever. Nagaveni was in a panic. She boiled greens from the backyard and made a decoction. She decided to go to Sheena Mayya's son's place or Subraya Upadhyaya's house and get some medicine. But, even as she stepped into the front yard of Upadhyaya's house, she heard wailing. Her feet held her back, not wanting to enter the house. From there she rushed to Mayya's house. There was an old woman sitting in the verandah. She was Narasimha's mother. There were four mats spread before her. Seeing Nagaveni, the old woman started crying. When Nagaveni asked her what she would do, the old woman answered that only God knew.

Nagaveni went home trembling. Her son was laid up with fever in the evening. Worried, she sat between the two mats where the two sick ones slept. She gave them a decoction of buttermilk-grass, a medicine which was her own creation.

She had seen it being given for some other complaint and thought it could do on this occasion. As she sat up watching the sick ones, her body also became warm and she too drank some of the decoction. By dawn, no one could talk to another. Rama was unconscious and there was no sound from Sathyabhamé. Nagaveni lay where she was. Would her house look any different, when the whole village was hit by the disaster?

None of the sick knew how time had passed. Was it hours or aeons?

It was two days later that Nagaveni became conscious. She had no memory of either the child or the house. She didn't even know who she was or what was happening. Someone would roast paddy, cook it and feed her gruel from a spoon. On the third day, she was more aware. When she opened her eyes, her fever had come down. It seemed as if the body was not hers. It was only then that she knew that the person who was feeding her was her uncle, Narayanappa. 'Chikkappa, where am I?' she asked.

'In your house.'

'Who sent for you?'

'I got the news and was anxious and so I came.'

Nagaveni remembered how she had wandered around for medicine. She also remembered the reason for it and the thought of the child rushed into her mind. 'My child? Atté?' she asked and turned around suddenly. She had memories of their lying beside her. But now, there was nobody next to her mat. 'Ayyo!' she cried, looking left and right. 'Don't be anxious. The child is in our house and is well now,' Narayanappa said. 'Atté?' she asked and her uncle didn't say anything. 'What happened to Atté? Who took her?' 'God,' Narayanappa had to say. Nagaveni became unconscious once again. Even after she gained consciousness, she didn't stop weeping. 'What will happen if you cry like this? You will only get tired. Just lie down quietly. Can the dead come back?' her uncle had to console her.

Nagaveni's thoughts leaped from her mother-in-law to her child. 'Even Rama is not here. You are lying. Did he die like Soora's people?' she asked. 'No, Nagu, the child is alive. I took him home since there was no one to look after him. The fever left him yesterday,' her uncle tried to reassure her. 'No, you are lying. Everyone has abandoned me. Why did you come to keep me alive?' she wailed. 'I swear your child is alive. You can see him after I bring him back tomorrow. Sleep now.' Narayanappa promised. She started sobbing again for Atté. The grief about her Atté and the child turned into fever once again, an escape from her worry about the family. The fever that had subsided appeared to relapse. She had to suffer for a few days more, weak and unconscious. Her thoughts raced, now to her child, now to her mother-in-law, both of whom had shared the hell of poverty with her until then. The frightening picture of the strange disease she had seen and experienced rolled, rose and fell like a black sea before her eyes. 'What happened? Has the whole village become empty? Did this disease hit only our neighbours? What happened in your house?' she enquired of her uncle. He mentioned the names of some who had died. When she asked about Subbi's house, the answer was that there was no one to go there and find out.

Nagaveni had been free from fever for five or six days. Since she was full of fear at not having seen her child, Rama was brought home. The meeting between the emaciated mother and her child was most touching. Stroking the child's body, Nagaveni asked, 'Shouldn't Atté's obsequies take place? Who will do it?' 'Yes,'replied Narayanappa, 'But he should come. We should first find out where he is.' He went to Mayya's house, not knowing what else to do. There had been deaths in that place as well. The old woman and two others had been consumed by the fever. Narasimha had rushed down anxiously from Bangalore. He described the havoc caused by the disease in that region as well. He was sad about his mother's death. Eventually, Narayanappa asked him, 'Narasimhayya, you come down here and talk of the calamity. Who should cry for whom? What will happen if no one cries at someone's death? Even in my family, things like this happened. It is said that there have

been instances where there was no one to remove the corpses and the whole household was annihilated.' There was some more talk of recent events. 'Our Nagaveni's mother-in-law died. You came home hearing about your mother's sickness. We want to inform our son-in-law about it. Who knows where he is? The dead won't come back. But should they not be offered something after death? When the son is not there, who else should do it?' 'I have heard that he is in Hotel Durbar with my brother in Mysore,' said Narasimhayya. 'He is wasting all his money even as he earns it, on gambling and other things. It looks as if it is a game that will not last for a long time.'

With that much information, Narayanappa returned. 'I have found out our son-in-law's address in Mysore. I shall send him a telegram and ask him to let us know if he is coming. It's fine if he comes. If he doesn't come, we can do something else. Nagaveni, we have had the same problem at home. This is a house of death and so is that. But there are a couple of people there strong enough to prepare food at least. Can I stay on here? No. Come, let's go home. You can come back after my wife's obsequies are over. Or, if that big man comes home, you can return.'

'I am strong enough to move my limbs,' said Nagaveni, 'I can cook now. Please go home and don't worry about me.' Narayanappa was slightly angry on hearing her words. 'You shouldn't always be so obstinate. Respect what elders say.' Realising that he was hurt, she agreed to go with him. They could go after the day cooled down, they decided. 'If I go off, who will give the cattle water and food? Ayyo, my memory! Shouldn't I have thought of it earlier?' she moaned. 'I have sent them to my house. There are people there to graze them. Here the cattle were wandering around with no one to tie them up,' her uncle said.

As the sun started going down, they set out for Airodi. Nagaveni had to stop on the way, resting here and there. Narayanappa carried the baby. 'See. You think you can cook. Is it fun to suffer for no reason?' When they crossed the river, Rama said he would carry his mother when he grew up.

Nagaveni said yes with a smile. Every such word that the child spoke lit up the darkness in her mind, which was distraught by poverty and separation. For a moment at least, the darkness inside her would disappear with the radiance of lightning and hope would shine. Before they crossed the river, the child asked, 'Amma, we have left Ajji behind. Shouldn't she come?'

'Where will she come from now?'

'Did Ajji go away? Or has she gone to Saligrama for the chariot procession?'

'Don't say such things, child.'

'Why?'

'You won't understand. Do you understand if I say she died?'

'Will I understand it when I grow older? The other day, Doddajji was lying down just like Ajji, Amma.'

'Yes, my child.'

Narayanappa was deeply grieved by what the child was saying. 'You will get tired if you talk. Sleep quietly on my shoulder.' The child slept after that. Taking twice as much time as they normally would, they reached home. Nagaveni felt as if she had come to one wilderness from another. But because of one man, her uncle, who moved about, firm of limb and strong of heart, without expressing his own grief, the rest could forget their worries.

Narayanappa went to Hangarakatté harbour and sent a telegram to Mysore from there. Not trusting Lachcha, he paid for the reply as well. The day after the next, his reply came. When Nagaveni was informed of it, she was relieved that he remembered his mother at least. Sathyabhamé had cried even when she was alive, saying that no one would perform the obsequies. God had seen to it that such a thing didn't come to pass.

On the ninth evening after Sathyabhamé's death, Lachcha arrived. Untouched by death, he arrived by bus from

Mysore wearing very smart clothes. He came straight to Narayanappa. He didn't seem to know that Nagaveni and the child were there. He came and sat in the verandah. Narayanappa came out on hearing that a well-dressed man had come. And there Lachcha was, the respectable gentleman! He was asked if he needed a drink. 'I don't want anything at all. Tell me what needs to be done. Who is there at home now? Is she there?' Lachcha enquired.

'They survived somehow or the other. Only your mother died. Everyone in the house was sick when she died. No one knew. A whole night had gone by that way before I went there. Eventually, I had to carry your mother's body all by myself and cremate her in the beach at the back of your house.'

Narayanappa realised that conversation with Lachcha was futile. 'You make arrangements for the obsequies. Nagaveni is still very weak. She won't be able to do anything. Stay here, and if you have no objection, you can have all the preparations made here.' 'Where is she?' Lachcha asked. Narayanappa took him inside. Nagaveni was sitting with her head bent. Rama was sleeping inside another room and was not to be seen. Lachcha came out without saying anything.

'I shall go to Orata's house and find out what the situation is there. I shall come back for dinner,' he said and walked away quickly.

Narayanappa went in. 'Your husband doesn't like it here. He has gone to visit Orata,' he said. 'You have done your job,' said Nagaveni, 'Let him do whatever God tells him to do.'

Rama woke up and came to his mother. Nagaveni remembered the day when 'Koosayya' became Rama. 'Your father has come,' she told him. 'Who's that?' he asked. 'The one who carried you when you were a baby,' she answered. 'Will he carry me now also? No one has to carry me now. I can walk, can't I?'

'Yes, child. You are a big boy now.'

'Tomorrow I will grow a moustache and become as big as you,' he said and the mother smiled in joy.

Narayanappa sat waiting for Lachcha to come back from Orata's house, but he never did. The next day, a messenger came and said, 'He will finish all the rituals right there. All the facilities he needs are available there.' Nagaveni felt that she had to be present if her mother-in-law's obsequies were performed at Orata's place. So, a man was sent to find out whether they would be performed at Orata's or in her house. Nagaveni would have to go back if the rituals were to be held at her place. The man came back with the message that they would be held in Orata's place and that the ailing Nagaveni need not come to Kodi.

She was hurt that her mother-in-law's obsequies were not going to be performed in her presence. 'Let him do what he wants. Whatever be the outcome of his action, good or bad, let it all be his,' said Narayanappa.

Within a few days, both obsequies and Vaikuntha Samaradhané were performed with great pomp and brahmins received a great deal of money as offerings. Narayanappa had been sent an invitation for the thirteenth day ceremony. He went there with Nagaveni in the morning.

'If not anything else, arrange for a meal for brahmins in your house. It will be good if the food is cooked there,' Narayanappa suggested. 'The two houses being nearby, there would be no problem making arrangements.' 'But how can a house that has been sold be ours?' Lachcha asked haughtily.

Downcast, Narayanappa went back. Nagaveni insisted on going back to her house. As Narayanappa brought her child to join her, he was boiling inside. 'It is better that you don't talk to him if he comes,' he warned before leaving.

The next morning, Lachcha came to the very house he had sold. 'I don't want you two to stay here. I want to take you to Mysore. Ask your uncle. If he says yes, you may come with me,' he said. Even those words were full of a kind of venom. So Nagaveni said, 'There is no need to ask him or anybody else. Don't I know that, ultimately, it is each one for himself?'

Rama, standing beside his mother said, 'Who is he? We shall stay here. We won't go with him.'

Lachcha's pride was hurt, badly. 'You have coached him to say those words! Let it be so,' he said and went away without saying anything more.

Suddenly, Nagaveni's face grew pinched as despair hit her. The next moment, she broke down, weeping, thinking of things gone by.

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The moment had certainly arrived when Nagaveni had to decide about her future. Her only family was Rama. Lachcha had left for Mysore without letting anyone know. There was no way Nagaveni would go with him even if he had begged her to. Her mind had been shattered and the pieces could not be welded together again. It didn't matter if he had no pity for her, but could there be a father who would not want to see his own son? Such thoughts came to her over and over again, and her blood boiled. Well, what could be done in future? Was it possible to carry on the battle of life with Rama in her arms? How could she and her four-year-old child spend time in that huge house? Could she bear the burden of cultivation all by herself? Was that all there was to life ? Until then, there had been people who had shared her sorrow. Doddatté passed away. Before the wound caused by the passing away of that golden life could heal, Sathyabhamé was lost without her being even aware of it. Wherever she went — hut, cowshed, verandah, bathroom, tank, the beach — the wind blowing from all directions would call her and talk to her. 'Is it possible for you to live alone with the child in this house? Have you no one you can call your own? Should that innocent child be sacrificed so that you can have your diet of tears? What should he do after you die?' When faced with

such questions, she would be bewildered. Like the path of the river turning into a whirlpool in the conflict between ebb and tide, and flowing haphazardly, her mind would also wander in many a direction. In between, if she saw Rama's eyes pleading for compassion, her lips would tremble and tears well up. 'Why has God put me in such a predicament?' she would ask. What if she went to her father's house? That would be tantamount to a defeat. The pain of having accepted a challenge from her husband but eventually needing to beg for alms would never go away. If Rama spent his life battling for gruel, there was the fear that he might grow up to be yet another human being having to beg for a living. One of his uncles was a doctor, another a lawyer. Another had just become a teacher. Some among her neighbours were educated and had found a new path in life. They knew a greater variety of food than palya made from avadé found in Kodi and Padukeré. If that was the case, what about her own child? Moreover, wouldn't the spirit of the old man, longing for his son, guarding all the wealth and placing it in her hands before dying, be hovering around the house? He had been cremated in the honné grove at the back. Wouldn't his spirit be looking from there hoping that his grandson at least would fulfil his desires?

It was a month after Sathyabhamé's obsequies were performed. Narayanappa came once or twice to her house only to find out if she needed anything. He knew her line of thinking but did not try to enforce his decision to take her away on the grounds that she had no reason to stay on in Kodi. Leave alone forcing her, he didn't even ask her to come. In fact, he had invited her over and over again when she persisted in saying that she wouldn't come. It was like making payasa and inviting someone who wasn't hungry. Now that she was wondering whether she should go, the invitation was no longer forthcoming.

Eventually, she made her cheerless face harder. She wandered around with lips pursed tightly. If Rama asked her, 'Won't you talk to me?' she would reply, 'Of course, I shall. If I don't talk to you, who else is there to whom I can talk?' Then he would ask her to tell him a story. She would tell one

that started from somewhere and trail off somewhere else. 'Amma, what kind of a story is this? What are you thinking of? Are you upset? Won't Ajji come back home?' he would question. Afraid he would be in pain remembering the good woman who had died, she would take him out.

Then something happened one day. After preparing some gruel, she sat in the verandah one evening staring at the thin clouds floating in the sky. Rama said, 'Amma, let's go to the sea.'

'It's late in the evening. Can't we go tomorrow?'

'No, let's go now. I am bored here and you don't talk to me either.'

'Who will talk to you by the sea?'

'The sea.'

'Does it talk to you, Anna?'

'Yes. We love each other. It behaves very freely with me, Amma. Come, let's go,' he kept insisting. Thinking that it was enough if the child's boredom was staved off, she went towards the sea, carrying him and the burden of her own weariness. The sky had already reddened. A little above the edge of the sea, there was a brown cloud spread right across, joining south and north. The sun behind had made its edges glow like metal rods from the furnace of a blacksmith. The child saw his mother's face in the light and said, 'Amma, isn't your face beautiful?' Nagaveni smiled and looked at his face which looked peaceful in the golden light and shone with a radiance like a lemon. 'Child, my precious, you look like a golden doll,' she said.

Rama's thoughts went towards the sea which was raising golden waves. 'Amma, how beautiful!' he said rushing towards the sea. The little feet went forward, stepping on grains of sand. They did not stop until he could bend down and kiss the golden water of the sea. His mother came running. 'Child, are you going to fall into the water?' The child was in a daze. 'Amma, how beautiful it is! Isn't it Amma?' he kept saying.

They both sat down by the sea. With his cheek against his mother's hand, the child watched the golden sun going down in the sea. The sun had planted a gold pillar from the foot of the child to the horizon. Nagaveni watched the Sun God and closed her eyes. Her hands stretched out towards Him in devotion. The child asked again, 'Amma, where has the sun gone?'

'Possibly into the sea.'

'Won't he come back?'

'He will come tomorrow. From the hills in the east. He has to move around all through the night.'

'Amma, won't Doddajji and Sannajji come back after walking around like that? Don't worry, Amma. They too will come back, I know.'

Nagaveni felt like crying at his words. 'Yes, child,' she said, 'Birth and death have to happen.' The child just sat there, sleepy-eyed. Nagaveni didn't feel like getting up either. Thinking it was time to go back home, she looked back to see the Chowthi moon already risen. The whole atmosphere was so peaceful that it seemed as if the soreness of the mind had disappeared and happy laughter had come to fill her life.

Nagaveni carried him home since he was fast asleep. 'I am a fool. I haven't lit the evening lamps before God. Is it enough if I just cook?' she thought, rushing back home. She stopped suddenly. Someone was sitting in her way. Vasudevayya had come to his daughter's place and had waited for her at home. He had then walked up to the beach and sat waiting. If she had been a little too late, he might have, as in the past, gone right up to Kodi, looking for his daughter.

He had learnt from his brother of the orphaned state of his daughter. Realising that his words would have no effect on Nagaveni, Narayanayya had asked his brother to come over. Though he had retired from his profession, he was a man without leisure. It was only that year that he had made separate houses for his children. He thought it was better for them to assume responsibilities and live their own lives as

there was no joy in staying under the same roof and filling up the house with their fights. So, he had divided his property among them. By God's grace, the children were earning well and were happy. It looked as though it was only his own family that had been cheated of happiness. His days of being a lawyer were over. He had given what he had to his children, cut down on his necessities and was free from attachment to material things. Though his sons called him over, he would just visit them but would not stay there. The husband and wife found it difficult to spend time because of all the free time they had, and their loneliness. He had learnt that his daughter had nowhere to go. He couldn't leave immediately though he wanted to. Nagaveni's sister had arrived home for the delivery of her child. He had to stay till she had delivered. Looking at his new grandson, he had the urge to see his other grandson and had rushed to Kodi.

'Where did you go in this darkness, Nagaveni?' he asked, taking the child from her. 'We went to the seaside. However bored Rama is, he forgets everything when he looks at the sea. Today, my weariness vanished, as well, when I went there,' she answered. 'How many more days are you going to spend like this counting waves?' said the father, and the daughter said nothing. 'When did you arrive?' she asked instead.

'I arrived by bus this evening and came straight home. I could have come a week earlier but your younger sister had come there to have her baby. I could come here only after the delivery.'

'Has Krishni given birth to a child? Boy or girl? Is it well?'

'It's a lovely child, a boy. Quite active. He looks just like his father who too had come. You should have seen his anxiety — it was as if he was the one giving birth!'

'She is a lucky woman, Appa.'

'What is luck and what is misfortune, Nagaveni? God tests everyone at times,' he said, trying to console her.

They came back home. When Rama was about to be lain down to sleep, he woke up. 'Rama, Appayya has come. Did you see him?' the mother asked the child. 'Ajja, Ajja,' he called and looked at him with eyes wide open. Meanwhile, Ajja had placed before his grandson a piece of Mysorepak he had remembered to bring with him. 'Ajja, did you bring this? Is it for Amma too? Which is my piece?' the child asked.

'It's all for you. Amma doesn't want any.'

'Ajja, Amma should have it. She doesn't eat well,' the child said, and the father looked at his daughter. 'Rama, you are lying. Don't I eat?' Nagaveni said. 'You eat very little,' said Rama.

Vasudevayya, seeing his daughter's face, wanted to change the subject and told his grandson to eat the sweet. The child put it in his mouth and said, 'Ajja, this is very tasty. Do you make it at home? Do you make it all the time? Will you bring some to me every time it is made? Sannajja bought me a snack when we went to Saligrama fair.' As the child began to talk about all sorts of things, Nagaveni felt a little shy to remain there. 'Appa, I shall make some rice. I had cooked for only the two of us,' she said and went in. 'Just some rice will do,' said the father. He had never eaten plain rice but thought that there might be nothing else besides rice in his daughter's house.

Nagaveni's cooking went on slowly. She sat making a noise with the grinding stone, scraped coconut and seasoned it. Even while she busied herself, the kitchen itself seemed to be a strange place. In truth, she had always cooked what was available and never what she desired to eat. By the time it was over, one of Soora's daughters-in-law asked through the window, 'Odathi, don't I need to come there tonight to sleep? Your father is sitting in the verandah.' 'That's right. Bachchi, you don't need to come today. My father is here. Anyway, how is your sick child?' Nagaveni asked. 'The fever has come down. Who knows? Maybe the Goddess thinks that the sacrifices she has taken are enough.' Before she left, she called again and said, 'Amma, if he wants you to go with him, don't be stubborn and say you want to stay on here.'

Even Nagaveni's hardened mind realised at that moment that her father might ask her to go with him and that he had probably come down solely for that. 'Bachchi, whatever God wills will happen. What is in Rama's fate and mine will happen,' she said in answer to Bachchi's advice.

Then Vasudevayya said, 'The child is sleepy and yawning. Give him some rice first. We can eat later.' Rama said, 'Ajja, I shall eat with you. Amma, what have you made for Ajja? Shall I cook? I know how to make hurli saaru, thambuli palidya. I know everything.'

'Yes, of course. You are a clever boy. Do you know how to make Mysorepak?'

'What's that?'

'That's what you ate just now.'

'Is that Mysorepak? No, it is halubai, halubai, halubai. Isn't it?'

'Yes. Hardened halubai. Can you make it?'

'If you put jaggery into rice, it becomes halubai.'

Meanwhile, there came a call for dinner. Nagaveni spread leaves for her father and her son and served pickles. Rice arrived. In addition, halubai which Rama had just remembered, came along. Her father was surprised. 'Halubai at this time?' he asked. Nagaveni smiled. 'Appa, don't they look after you at Krishni's? Can't I boil a little flour? It has been a long time since I made anything special for the child.' Rama ate halubai with great gusto. Vasudevayya felt contented with her hospitality. Even as he tasted the sweetness of halubai, his heart was touched by his daughter's love for him. Just as the sweetness of the dish sealed his mouth, his daughter's plight made him tongue-tied.

In order to get the obstructed flow of talk to move again, he said, 'Nagu, why don't you sit with us and eat?' But she wouldn't listen, and spent all the time talking to him and feeding him. When he went to wash his hands, she sat down to eat. Vasudevayya came out after eating. Rama went to chat

with his mother, who was eating the gruel she had prepared earlier with some salt and pepper. 'Amma, halubai for you?' asked Rama. 'I have eaten it,' she said. 'That's a lie,' said Rama. He was upset and complained to his grandfather. 'Ajja, Amma has no halubai. You give her what you brought,' he begged. Vasudevayya walked into the kitchen. 'Is that true? Should you eat only the gruel and give us all that you prepared? That was why you wouldn't sit with us to eat.' Nagu smiled. 'Watching you eat has meant more to me, Appa, than my eating. When can I ever pay back what I owe you?' Vasudevayya was deeply hurt. He called Rama. 'Give this to your mother. Yours has been kept separately. Amma didn't eat this hard halubai,' he said and sent a piece of Mysorepak. When Rama tried to give it to her, she said, 'No, child, it is for you, for tomorrow. Keep it there.' Rama was angry. 'You eat. I don't want yours,' he said. She ate it to please him. 'Tasty, isn't it?' she said. 'Amma, the halubai you made was even better and tastier. Sweet, sweet, sweet jaggery! Soft, soft, soft butter!' he said.

'This is something else. This is not halubai. This must have been bought in a shop.'

Nagaveni's dinner was over and she went to the tank to wash her hands. Washing up was over. She spread a mat and put grandfather's torn green shawl on it. 'Rama, it's very dark. You sleep,' she said. 'Amma, won't Ajja tell me a story?' he asked. 'He doesn't know stories,' she said. 'Is it only you who knows?' he asked. 'I know my story,' she said and laughed. Rama asked her pleadingly if he could sleep on her lap. Grandfather invited him to sleep on his. He sat cross-legged and Rama lay on his lap and fell asleep. When he was fast asleep, his mother picked him up and put him to bed. 'I shall get your bed ready,' she said and spread a mat and placed a pillow of palmyra leaves for his head. 'There is nothing to spread on it,' she said with a smile.

'Come and sit here,' Vasudevayya called his daughter. Even as he began, he advised her not to be stubborn. 'Nagaveni, do you really need to stay here anymore? Your mother-in-law and Doddatté have passed away. What is the use of insisting

on staying here? Do you want to stay all alone in this house? There may come a stage when there will be no one to sweep the house. Who can stay here and live on the proceeds of cultivation? Let us imagine that you are able to do it. What will happen to your child? Will the days to come be like the days that have gone by? Shouldn't he grow up educated? Look at the people in the village. Look at people here, and people there. They wander from town to town looking for jobs. When I was young, salvation was found right here for those who were born here. It's not like that now. It seems as if you need more to eat. In future, you cannot earn a living wearing those short dhotis.'

Both knew the direction the conversation would take. She too knew that her counter arguments would only prove her doggedness and would in no way be beneficial to Rama. She had to live on for the sake of the boy alone, in order that his boat may keep sailing.

'What do you think I should do?' she asked.

'What else? We are also bored at home. Krishnaveni has come for a few days. When she leaves, the house will be empty. The children are happy living by themselves. If you can come and live with us, we can acquire some merit in our life for having looked after Rama and you as long as we lived. Let him study as much as his fortune allows. All those who get educated won't turn out like Lachcha.' Nagaveni agreed to go with him. But leaving everything behind was the one thought that bothered her.

'What? Can you take along the house and other things? Moreover, you can't say this land is yours. He has sold it and finished with it.'

'But we have the lease.'

'Yes. But don't you have to produce something in return? If the land for cultivation is handed over to someone else, who would want just the house?'

'Whatever it is, Uncle said that this was a permanent lease. If we want to come and stay here sometime in the

future, we can do it. Moreover, what will Rama do when he grows up? If he wants to see the place where he was born, would it be right on our part to have given it up? Let us give the land on sub-lease and keep the house,' she said.

Vasudevayya wasn't sure that his daughter's words carried any special weight. But in order not to hurt her, he said yes and got up. 'Appa,' said Nagaveni later, 'Rama adores the sea. It is the one thing that makes his day. If he desires anything in future, we must not come in the way of his fulfilling his desire.'

So, in the night, the waves of thoughts in her mind were at peace. She slept without a worry. Waking up the next morning, Vasudevayya said, 'Let's leave today. There aren't many pots and pans here. Narayana will have whatever there is brought over. We shall also look for someone who will take the land on lease. Are there any other arrangements to be made? Tell me.'

Nagaveni remembered Bachchi who had come and talked to her the night before, and sent for her. 'Bachchi, it looks as if our bond with this place is severed. Appa wants us to go with him. I said yes.' Bachchi approved of it. 'That's much better. Just because Saraswathamma and your father-in-law shed their blood to stay here, can you carry on struggling here with the child? Go. Maybe you will live more happily because of the child's good fortune. What does it matter where you are?' Later she was attracted by the idea of the lease. 'Amma, I believe your lease is a permanent one. Don't let it go. What you need to produce is not much. If you want to lease it out, please remember us.' Vasudevayya heard this and asked her husband to meet him. He came and said, 'Ayya, let's have your land on annual lease. We had worked for Aithalaru before. Let us be under your obligation again.' Vasudevayya said yes straightaway. His burden had been lightened by the arrangement.

It was decided that they would leave after lunch. Nagaveni carried the child in her arms and went to inform her neighbours. She went to Narasimhayya and Subraya Upadhyaya.

The latter's wife said. 'So be it. Let God look after you. It's all His game,' and blessed her.

Nagaveni and Rama had their lunch and packed the few things they had. The one concern remaining was of Kali and Kapila, both descended from the line of Champi and Kempi from the days of Sarasothi and Parothi. She thought of sending them to Airodi. In the morning rush of departure, they hadn't even been driven out for grazing. It was only after lunch when people came to carry things to Airodi that she felt bad about making the cattle leave the place. Soora's eldest daughter-in-law Bachchi and his son Kaala came to see their mistress off. Nagaveni said all of a sudden, 'Kaala, I don't feel like driving these cattle to where I am going. It is true they do not yield milk anymore. But I feel they still belong to us. Whatever it may be, you have looked after our place. I shall give them to you to look after. When they calve and we come and stay here for a day, let Rama have a ladle of milk from them at least.'

She was unbearably sad when she handed over Kali and Kapila to Bachchi. Rama was there. 'Amma, are the cows for them?' he asked. 'They will look after them,' she said. Gradually, it dawned on the child that they were leaving the house. He might not have paid attention before as he was immersed in his games. But it was clear to him now from what the adults said that the moment of leaving had arrived. Vasudevayya came back from Airodi. 'Rama, come. Let's go home.' The child started yelling as soon as he realised that they were taking him away from that place. 'I am also coming with you. Who do we have here?' said Nagaveni but all her consoling words were of no avail. 'I want this house. Let's stay here alone,' said the child and the grandfather was bewildered. No one could stop him crying. He stopped only after Nagaveni said, 'Shall we go to the sea and gather some lovely shells?' She went to the sea with her son at three in the afternoon and showed him the boats with white sails. She brought him back after gathering shells and some solidified foam. Eventually, she spoke to him gently. 'My child, we have no one here. Let us go to grandfather's house.'

'We will come back here, won't we? he asked. 'Yes. We can come back whenever we want.' 'Do you promise?' he asked and made sure she meant to honour it.

The journey that day was like the one she had undertaken to send Doddatté and Sannatté to Kashi. Her heart was overflowing with sorrow. Not wanting to let Rama know of her grief, she suppressed her sighs. Bachchi and her husband came right up to the river to see them off. The old wife of Subraya Upadhyaya had come as well. Nagaveni took her child to her and said, 'Ajji, touch our Rama and bless him so that God may look after him well.' The old woman recalled the scene of the last day of Sarasothi's life. 'Nagu, this is the child that your God has blessed. Am I greater than her? Her piety will keep him safe always.'

The river was in high tide by the evening. It was full and was rushing around in whirlpools. Vasudevayya held the child up so that water wouldn't touch him. Nagaveni crossed the river walking behind him. The river came up to her waist but she was not conscious of it at all. Her eyes counted the tiles of Aithala's storeyed house over and over again. When the house disappeared behind the trees, Sheena Mayya's portal could be seen. Even that disappeared soon. By the time she reached her uncle's house, her neck must have got swollen because of her repeatedly turning around to look.

Narayanayya welcomed Nagaveni and her child once again. Rama recognised his uncle and smiled. Everyone at home gave them a very warm welcome.

Only Nagaveni's mind was not at peace that night. It wasn't sadness or worry. But her mind was in a turmoil with thoughts which had no beginning and no end. Dreams of the many days she had spent in her father-in-law's place spread before her eyes like waves. Along with them, her life in the future, her ignorance about the house she was born and brought up in, and her child's future — these spread like indistinct shadows over the clear pictures of her past and disappeared. She spent the night and the next morning dreaming. Whenever she remembered her child, she would stroke his body. She had a strange fear that he may leave her unannounced, like her husband had. Was there room for such suspicion?

Vasudevayya planned to reach Mangalore immediately with his daughter. Narayanayya said, 'Poor child, let her stay here for a few days.' Vasudevayya remembered his other daughter with the newly born child, alone in Mangalore. However, he decided to stay back for the sake of his brother and his own dear daughter. Rama made some friends during that time. He played a lot with Narayanayya's younger daughter. 'Don't you have a sea in your house?' he asked her. So, they took him to Hangarakatté. The lovely scene of the river meeting the sea could be seen there. It only provoked Rama's zest for the sea. When he came home in the evening, he said, 'Amma, you can't go to the sea from this place. There is a river in between. You can only see it but can't go near.'

Nagaveni decided to journey back home once if the child's longing for the sea remained as it was. She thought she would show him the sea the next day before leaving for Mangalore. She told her father about it. He called Rama and teasingly said, 'Rama, I will make you a big fishing net. You can go to the sea everyday in Mangalore, cast your net and catch fish.' Nagaveni was sad. 'Appa, don't say things like that. He is a foolish child. What will happen if he makes a big fuss about it tomorrow?' 'No, Nagaveni,' her father assured her, 'If he sits outside our house and sees buses and jutkas, the sea will be forgotten soon enough. Children's longing for anything lasts only for a few days.'

Nagaveni didn't think it was true. She couldn't believe that Rama would ever lose his love for the sea. The reason was that it was also her favourite sight.

The night was over and the next day arrived. Even before she thought of it, Rama said, 'Amma, won't we look at the sea? I am bored here.' 'We shall see it in the evening,' she said. Rama played with the other children in the house the whole afternoon. After lunch, when evening fell, he asked, 'Amma, are there no cows here?' When she told him that there were, he asked whether they didn't go to the plains by the sea for grazing. 'That's in our village,' Nagaveni said.'Let's go there,' Rama pleaded. 'What's there for us? Is there enough to eat? Here we have milk and curds and everything else.

Tomorrow we shall go to your grandfather's house. There you can see lots of motor cars and jutkas.' Then she told him a story about buses.

The 'tomorrow' did arrive and everyone bathed and got ready to leave. Their luggage had already crossed the river and gone ahead. Everyone in the house was there to take leave of Vasudevayya and the other two. A bus arrived. 'Is this the bus?' Rama asked. 'No, it's the one you see on the other side of the river,' said his mother. The child crossed the river with everyone else and enjoyed himself immensely. The boats fascinated him. The journey further by bus was all set. 'Rama, I shall see you again. Nagaveni, you should visit us at least once a year,' said Narayanayya. There were tears in her eyes when she said yes. Deep inside, she had doubts. Would they ever go back and drink the water of Kodi Aithala's house?

They all got on to the bus and Narayanappa took leave of his big brother. The whole day was spent in boarding buses and crossing rivers. Rama was not bored at all during the entire journey. His joy and enthusiasm every time they came to a river was beyond words. Anyhow, by the time they reached Mangalore, it was evening. There, Nagaveni's mother stood ready to greet and embrace her daughter. She hugged Rama tight and exclaimed, 'Have you come at last, my precious?' She took them to Krishni's room even before they could wash their feet. Nagaveni saw her sister's face and looked at the baby. 'Rama, look at your little brother,' she said.

'Is he for me to play with, Amma?' Rama asked. 'Yes,' said the baby's mother.

So many years had gone by since Nagaveni had seen her sister. It had been three years since she even saw her mother. The meeting was a unique coming together. 'Nagu, the child must be hungry. Shall I give him milk?' her mother asked. 'Yes, I am very hungry. So is Amma and Ajja too,' said Rama. As she went in quickly to prepare some refreshments for them, Vasudevayya had Rama's feet washed and took him straight to the kitchen to drink his milk. Nagaveni didn't move from her

sister's bedside. She kept staring at her face. They sat like two dumb women looking at each other.

Krishni's husband came in then. He was about to go back, not knowing who it was that was in the room. Krishni called him in. 'Come in. This is my big sister,' she said. He had heard the name of the unfortunate woman but hadn't seen her. 'When did you arrive? Are you all well?' he asked as he came in. Nagaveni couldn't think of anything to say.

Right behind him came her big brother Sadashiva. He called 'Nagaveni' even before he stepped into the room laughing. She stood up on hearing his voice. 'Where is the child, Veni?' he asked. 'He must be with his grandfather,' she replied. Sadashivayya went looking for him and gave him many toys. His face looked new to Nagaveni, as if he was a stranger. Later, the other doctor brother arrived as well. Before the evening set in, the whole family had assembled there. Rama was dumbfounded by the warmth and love showered on him. He did not know the meaning of such love. He didn't understand the meaning of such welcome and gifts. If an innocent child felt like that, what about Nagaveni who knew and understood the significance of such things? She discovered at that moment what she had been missing all those days in the past.

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It wouldn't be wrong to say that those few days when Nagaveni returned to her mother were like days at a festive fair. The house was till then a place where Krishnaveni had come to have her baby, but now it had become a house where she, being a rare guest, was fussed over. It was a treat to fondle Rama who had crossed the age of having to be carried, as compared to Krishnaveni's helpless little child. It was true that she appeared to be an ideal in the eyes of the family for

having lived in destitution until then. They had not seen what she had gone through, but they had heard about it and felt very sad. It was no wonder then that her family had reacted to her past and poured all their sympathy on Nagaveni and her child. She spent her time being looked after by her mother or nursing her sister. Her brother's house was there to visit once in a while. There were other houses too and there were also friends who had once been her classmates. Her time was spent among them. Rama would play at times with his mother or with his grandparents or with Sadashiva's children. Amidst all the games, old memories would sometimes come to him. If they put a new shirt on him, he would remove it saying it would get dirty and that he would wear it for the fair in Saligrama. He would then walk around naked. He would be surprised if they said that there were more shirts and he could have another to wear for Saligrama. After a month's feeding and care, his face changed and it acquired lustre. The ribs that had stuck out of the body disappeared and the famished look vanished. Nagaveni would kiss him on his full lips and say that she herself had deprived him of food for so long.

It was a time of plenitude for her too. The bother of sweeping and gathering things all day long was gone as there were servants to do it. At the most, she would help her mother in the kitchen. The old lady didn't want her daughter even to move. 'Wait for a few more days, Nagu,' she would say. As a result of all the care, she no longer wore the look of premature ageing, though the former youthful exuberance did not reappear. Her face filled out. 'We can stay on here, can't we my pet?' she would say to her child. 'Amma, we have a lot to eat here. Are we going to stay here ? In grandparents' house? Who will stay in our house? Who will take Kali and Kapila for grazing?' he would ask. Just once in a while, his thoughts would flow towards sea and water. 'Amma, there's no sea here. No place to play like we had there. You tell me not to go on the road. How much space is there in the house?' At other times he would tell her that she was lying when she said that there was a sea in Mangalore. She took him to College Hill a couple of times to satisfy his longing for the sea. She would show him the sea spread out shining at a distance without any waves,

and ask him what it was. 'That is the sea but a worthless sea! Our sea is so strong! The one here is lying down like a buffalo!' he would answer. 'No, child, this is just like that. You can't see anything clearly from a great distance.' It was like tempting him with jaggery that only touched his ankle. It wouldn't fulfil his longing for its taste. If he harassed her too much, she would say that she would ask his uncle to take him to the sea sometime.

'When?'

'When he is free.'

'You should come too.'

'Yes.'

It was only this assurance that made him wait till the next day. It was impossible for lawyer Sadashiva to find some free time, and so it was not possible for the child to have his wish. The May holidays would start in two months' time. Perhaps they could go then.

It was time for Krishni to leave her mother's house. Her home was in faraway Madras. Her husband who had gone back earlier arrived again to take her home. There was a lot of activity in her father's house because of her departure. At the time of leaving, Krishni asked her sister to come over. 'Let him get settled here. If he gets used to staying here without me, what does it matter where I am?' she replied. She felt deep inside that even if she could be happy some day, she would still be without a home of her own. Her parents' home could never be hers. Until Rama grew up and gave her a home, she would be like an idol in a procession who would receive offerings from people here and there.

The question before her was more difficult to answer. How could she kill time? Earlier, there was a sea of unending chores. Now, there was unending leisure. Her biggest job was to bathe Rama and play with him. As her father remarked, the child would be five years old soon and start going to school in June. Then she would have nothing more to do than count the tiles in the house.

Her father, though he had retired, would go to his son's house and advise clients in order to spend time. He would visit a few friends at other times. In the evening, the house would become a monastery. Devotion would flow into the house like it did nowhere else. Pictures of saints such as Siddharooda were placed in front, and puja and chanting of mantras would go on and on. It was a way for Vasudevayya to pay back with compound interest whatever puja had not been performed in the past so that he could now roam about in the kingdom of devotion. When he had the time, *Life of Ramakrishna Paramashamsa* and the Bhagavadgeetha became his hand-mirrors. Nagaveni hadn't yet received such a call. The urge for devotion hadn't developed within her, either. Neither had the yearning for life found fulfilment. She lit the lamp before God as she used to at home and came away. But she hadn't got into the habit of stretching her legs whenever she could, counting the rudrakshi beads and chanting *'Om Namah Shivaya'* as Sarasothi had.

Rama would become a greater devotee than his grandfather. If he could get hold of cymbals, he sang prayers for an hour and a half. If cymbals were forgotten amidst games, he finished in just three minutes. The mother and child hadn't yet got used to the totally changed atmosphere. His mother realised it as well. 'Are you feeling bored? Come, child, let's see Lord Manjunatha,' she would say and they would go to the Kadri temple nearby. When she came out of the temple, she would climb the hill in front and show Rama the distant sea. Nagaveni's mother had to wait in the temple until they returned. Then they would all go home. Her mother had many friends. So she would take her daughter and grandson along to their homes and spend time.

Time hung heavy on Nagaveni's hands and she decided to start reading. She realised the very day she held an English story in her hand that the English she had learnt long ago had been forgotten. And so, that was abandoned. One day she opened the Gita her father read everyday. It wasn't difficult to read Kannada. She went through it and was deeply influenced here and there by what it said. But she didn't feel like

mumbling it from beginning to end like her father did. 'Why should I be so barren of devotion? Parothi, Sarasothi and Sathyabhamé would find time for tireless devotion to God despite being extremely busy. Though I have so much time, why can't I get into the habit?' she would ask herself. Then she would turn to stories and novels. She started borrowing books and read all sorts of things. With practice and will, she got back to the English she had forgotten. And the books in Kannada were there. She could carry on reading some story or novel until Rama snatched the book from her. She would wonder if people were really like the characters she came across in books. Another of the books she read would make her say that her poverty was no less than what was described in it. There were some she thought were totally false. So, she weighed the books in the light of her wide experience, if not with depth of intellect. To while away time or because Rama insisted on it, she would sweeten or spice up what she had read and tell him the story. But there was one desire which his temperament always demanded to be fulfilled. No story would be complete unless it ended with a big sea with blue waves tossing about and a red sun sinking into it completely.

Time passed by. It does so according to one's limitations, happily or in a tiresome manner. Anyway, it was four months since Nagaveni had arrived at her mother's. When the month of June arrived, grandfather coaxed Rama into going to school. Rama was also fed up with staying at home. Moreover, there was no lack of desire in him to play with his young friends, Chida and Malathi, Sadashiva's children. They gradually started taking Rama to their school. He came home after the first day at school and said, 'Amma, a lot of children come to school. But they all sit quietly like owls. What a worthless school!' But the next day when Chida came and asked if Rama was not coming, Rama dressed himself and started off, hoping to find companions at the school. Within a month, he became a great personage carrying a big bag twice a day. So, his boredom disappeared. But time hung heavy on his mother's hand from the time he left till the time he returned in the evening. He came home for lunch in the afternoon but it was quite possible that he would go off to Sadashiva's house as well. That house

was nearer the school than his grandfather's. So, Nagaveni wasn't too eager to call him back home. But she would wash his feet and ask how his day at school was and he would describe his adventures.

Nagaveni now had the opportunity to seek refuge in the imaginary world of novels. She had to forget herself in it as there was nothing else to do. The reading that she did and the leisure ruffled up many a desire in her. She had a husband who had brought her to her present state and her life had been destroyed because of him. She was twenty-five years old and had many more days to live. She had to turn pages, read stories of other people and realise that her own life was empty. She had a child and he was growing up under the protection of his grandfather. What should he become, and what would happen to her? She reflected on it, facing waves of constant uncertainty. If she carried on like this, her life would melt away in the heat of the fire within. By the time Rama held his head high as a man, she herself would be reduced to ashes. She should stay alive till then. The child should not live on as an orphan and she should be able to say, 'Here I am. Don't worry.' She wanted to live with that wish, at least. But, could she live for another twenty-five years, just the way she was, without work? The question would surface over and over again.

The strange question found a way of answering itself without her knowledge. There was a musical get-together at a friend's place in Kadri. A famous violinist was giving a performance in the evening and Sadashiva and his family were going to attend it. Thinking that his sister could accompany them instead of sitting at home looking listless, he came to invite her. She was prepared to take any way out of her boredom, 'Music? Violin? I had learnt a little music when I was young. Who will remember it now? Yes, I will come. It's time for Rama to come back from school. He too could have come,' she said. 'Our Chida will bring him. You come with me,' Sadashiva said. So, they all got together at a friend's house which was a hundred yards away.

It was the house of Sadashiva's friend, Mohanaraya. He was also a lawyer by profession. And there was another lawyer

friend who had also tried his hand at music. They had arranged a performance purely for pleasure. When they reached the place, the violinist was already tuning the instrument. When they went in, there were none of the usual greetings or chatter. The performance started right away. All the women sat on one side. Nagaveni had half her mind on Rama and listened to the music with the other half. She didn't think the musician could sing. Nevertheless, he would start singing and then let his hands take over from there. His crazy dreams and thoughts danced about on his fingers, emanated from the strings and filled the room. Raga after raga came rolling. His performance which began with the skill of his hands continued into an expansion of thought and feeling. Those who wanted to exhibit their knowledge of music would satisfy themselves by marking the rhythm, slapping on their thighs and saying, 'This is Bilawal, this is Behag, this is like the music of the South.' The musician, who began by asking what he should play, eventually continued as he pleased. The concert went on for two or three hours and everyone was entranced. There were also women who went home half-way to attend to cooking. Those who went away left for good, but a few who stayed on sat like rocks till nine o'clock in the night. Rocks with ears, of course. Nagaveni was one such. Her ears were one with the raga and its spread. She was delineating her life and the episodes of her past through it. The sea, estuary, river, waves, wind, hurricane, death, pain, disease and desires — everything floated along on musical barges. Her face was set and her eyes half closed. When the performance ended, Rama was on her lap with his head leaning against her thigh.

When everyone applauded at the end of the performance, Nagaveni wanted to get up. It was then that she realised that Rama was on her lap. When she asked him when he had come to her, he said it was a long time ago. Everybody started going home. Nagaveni folded her hands before the musician like a child. On the way, Sadashiva asked her what she thought of the evening. He had come there, gone back, and returned again. Nagaveni said humbly, 'How would I know, Anna? I thought it was on the whole good.' Her mind had discovered the depth of that evening's music in a language without words.

Her heart was so full that she sighed with great contentment and she said, 'He is really a great musician, Anna.' 'I feel the same. When he is playing the violin, it doesn't look as if he is here at all,' her brother said.

They all reached home. Her old father was waiting for his daughter without having eaten his supper. 'Appa, you should have come too. I have never heard music like that before,' said Sadashiva. 'Even if it is music, I get a headache if I listen for two or three hours,' Vasudevayya said. The son laughed. 'Appa, your bhajans take that much time once in a while. Don't we sit quietly until it is all over?' 'What is it to you children? Are devotional music and mere music the same?' the father retorted.

Sadashiva stayed there for dinner. As he was eating, he told his father that he felt Nagaveni's boredom would be relieved if she learnt music. Nagaveni sat eating beside him. She looked up at her brother. Her heart waited for what would follow. 'Don't you think so, Nagaveni? There was no one to teach you well, over there. Nevertheless, if you learn it, your boredom will at least disappear.' 'I feel so after listening to the music this evening,' she replied. He left after supper.

Nagaveni went to the bedroom with Rama. When she spread the bed and they lay down, Rama asked, 'Who made the violin?' She smiled at the child's strange question. 'Why? Wasn't it good? Were you bored?' she asked.

'Amma, when I sat on your lap I did not hear music or the violin. You remember our house? I felt I could see the house in Kodi, the estuary, the sea and everything else, 'Yes, child.' 'Did you see it as well?' 'Yes, I did'. Rama didn't say much. 'Amma, when do we go back to the house in Kodi?' he asked. 'When you grow up,' the mother answered. 'Amma, are you going to play the violin?' 'Well, let's see.'

After that, Rama stared quietly at his mother's face. 'It's late. Don't you have school tomorrow? Sleep now,' she said and lay down with him close to her. From that moment on, all the melodies of the evening, of that twilight, came surging towards her, wave after wave. Sleep became a boat

swaying about on the waters. It became a cradle, and the music, a lullaby. When she woke up in the morning, she experienced the tranquility and the vitality that her new life had fashioned for her. It must have been aeons since she had experienced such joy.

From that day, she felt that she should have learnt music. Though she had learnt Keerthané and Varna before marriage, they had disappeared as if they had gone up the ghats. Though it would be difficult to learn again, she could at least spend her time happily. With that desire, she broached the topic with her father. Didn't he know that, though she had arrived at his house seven or eight months ago, her mind was always counting the stars in the sky ? He had told her that if she sat before God with cymbals, she could find peace. She did sit to sing songs of devotion as her father suggested. The idol of God would be before her, but inside it was the flowing water of the estuary. In between, thoughts of Rama's future would float and shine and disappear. So, one day she had to tell her father that there was no use in people holding cymbals when their minds were not steady. After having said that, she did indeed doubt whether the peace that eluded her when she held the cymbals would be hers when she plucked the strings of a violin. But hadn't the violin she listened to at the performance revealed to her a totally different kind of solution?

She started learning how to play the violin. She sang, too, just to practise and memorise. There was Subraya, who was well-known in the whole of Mangalore, to teach her. He was an old man and had neither the mastery nor the ability to teach but he had the humility to say that he could teach only what he knew. 'Learn what you think is good for you,' was his philosophical advice. When she was young, the same teacher had asked her whether music could be learnt without diligence. He had become very gentle after twelve years. Old age, and poverty – a close companion of musicians – were both following him. That was why, perhaps, even his music seemed to have aged. Nagaveni went ahead with her fingers sliding over the strings after Rama left for school and continued until he returned. Once in a while, she would get angry, saying that

she would know what music was only when her body lay on a pile of firewood, and feel utterly dejected. At times she herself would get scared of the jarring noises she produced and would look outside to make sure that no one was there. Half the time with the teacher would be spent in learning and the other half in listening to his domestic problems. Listening to him talk about his children, his wife, her sickness, and their difficulties, she would be beset by sympathy. Subraya would say at times that he felt like breaking the violin and bow into pieces and stuffing them into the fire because of all his domestic problems.

Having heard him say such a thing, she couldn't sleep that day. She had sought the refuge of music to drown her domestic sorrows but her teacher had thoughts of giving up music because of familial problems. What could one make of such a situation? She was dejected as a result but the music she had heard the other evening was not like the music of Subraya's life. She felt consoled with the thought that it was not the kind of music which would make one forget one's family.

Like the pattering rain in Mangalore coming down for four months, the sun heating up the earth for six to eight months, the same rain falling with ferocity till the earth was poisoned, and the same sunshine making the earth dry up, the turmoil in her mind went on for many days. Her violin practice went on accordingly. At times there would be practice for hours on end, and at other times, nothing whatsoever for a few days. Indifference to the point of the violin strings rusting away! Subraya concealed his philosophy, and fearing that he would lose his livelihood, advised her not to give up music for it was learnt by the angels themselves. It shouldn't be neglected, he said. Thus, he put humility and fear into her and made sure that she continued with her lessons.

* * *

Rama gradually extended his kingdom. The number of his friends increased as did the fun and games. His horizon had been occupied by his mother until then. But now there were grandfather, grandmother, many friends, big brothers and games. And so the influence of his mother decreased considerably. But his love for her didn't lessen. There was no change in his affection and enthusiasm while talking to her, though when he called 'Amma,' there was no longer that ambrosia-like sweetness to it. The dictates of the boy's age and environment had sought his compliance. That was all.

What if it was Mangalore? What new thing could it offer to those who sat where they were and ate where they always did? The same environment, the same friends, the same desires and the same turmoil! It was twice as long as six months since Nagaveni had arrived there. Two years and then three years passed. The only special thing was that while in Kodi, her housework absorbed her time; now it was music which consumed it. In the same way, Rama's time was filled with fun and games.

Was Rama special? Like others, like his big brother Chidananda and big sister Jaya, he was good at games, intelligent, and a great reader. He also knew his grandfather's love and concern was not concentrated only on him. But there was one thing that showed up in his childhood more than in others, and that was 'scribbling' on the floor, on the walls or on paper. That was the name that Nagaveni had given to the new thing that her son had learnt. 'Amma, did you see? I can draw the sea, this is a boat, this is fish, this is the big net, these are clouds and this is the moon,' he would exclaim as he drew pictures on anything he could lay his hands on. He would ask her how she liked them. 'Don't write wherever you feel like. Don't you have a slate? Don't write all over the verandah and make the place dirty,' she would tell him. 'Amma, is the slate enough to draw the sea? The verandah itself is too small. If I draw the banks, there is no place for fields. If I draw them, there is no place for the estuary,' he would say. 'Draw a small sea on the small slate.' 'How can the sea become small, Amma?' he would ask. The sky is the limit for children's

talk and their imagination runs even beyond the sky. If it runs on sensible lines, it gets an answer. If it is absurd, the child is called a foolish one. What else could Nagaveni do?

But the one thing that she discovered for certain from his 'scribbling' was that his obsession for the sea since birth had never really left him. In the beginning, it was difficult to spend days without the sea. Then he didn't like stories without the sea. Now, there was no picture without the sea in it. Once in a while she would say, 'In its previous birth this child must have been born in the house of fishermen with big nets,' and burst out laughing. Rama would get angry if he heard it. 'I won't ever hold a net. You hold it. I don't want either a fish or a net,' he would say.

During all those years, Vasudevayya went to Airodi once in a while. Though he went there after his daughter came home, he never stayed there for more than a few days. Once, when he went there, Nagaveni wished she could go home and look around. The wish was in her mind but was not expressed. She would think that she wouldn't go back to stay in Kodi anyway. The three-year stay in Mangalore solved the food problem for the child and she didn't have to face poverty either. Watching him grow happily, she would wonder whether there was any need to long for Kodi or for a life of sweat and toil. It was bearable, for her, but why should the child be dipped and drowned in it? When they left Kodi, the thought that they would go back to live there was in her, but now she tried to forget it so that the child might not be pulled out of the warm bed he had acquired.

Rama had spent five years in Mangalore and he was ten now. That was when the lawyer's family had an occasion to go to Airodi. Narayanappa's daughter's wedding had been fixed. The oldest member of the family was Vasudevayya and who else could play the patriarch at the wedding? There was no question of his going alone. They fixed the wedding in summer for everyone's convenience. The lawyer was accompanied by his grandchildren and others. They hired a car and reached Airodi. It is not necessary to add that Nagaveni and Rama were in the party that travelled to Airodi and reached the place three days before the event.

None of them had any free time while they participated in the fair-like celebrations. Narayanappa was extremely happy that the wedding had been so enjoyable with everyone in the family present.

Vasudevayya decided to stay on for a few days there. It was not surprising that Nagaveni wished to have a look at her house. She thought that Rama might have forgotten everything. Bachchi had rushed to see her mistress and the young master. 'Amma, when are you coming home? The whole village is like a crematorium after you left. Amma, Kali which you gave us died last year from cattle disease. But your Kapila has two calves now. Amma, now we have four measures of milk. Why do we need milk and butter? You must come and stay there for a few days. Let the young master drink a lot of milk.'

Bachchi showed all the traditional trust and love towards her mistress. In five years Bachchi had really become thin as a stick. 'You look so good now, Amma. Even the young master looks fine. One can't even recognise him now.' 'Why are you looking so thin?' asked Nagaveni in return. 'How is your husband? And the children?' 'What can I say, Amma. There are problems one after another. It is fine if we have enough to eat at home. We can at least manage this because we have a piece of your land. We haven't paid your uncle anything for the lease. We used to pay five measures for the lease when your father was alive. Now, the new owners have raised it to ten measures. So we had to let it go. Aren't there quite a few souls at home to feed? Is it enough to cultivate the land for a mere three measures of rice? Even if we want to take a few more pieces of land on lease here and there, the only ones who can work are just the two of us. The children are old enough only to drive cattle but not to plough.'

Nagaveni had a strong desire to see her house, after listening to Bachchi. She asked Rama. 'Shall we go and look at the sea?' Rama danced in joy. She took him and the other children along and crossed the river. They came to the fields in front of the house. Even the storeyed house built by Aithala could be seen. Memories of the last days of her father-in-law came rushing into her. Before she went into her house, she

stood in front of Bachchi's house and called out, 'Bachchi, we have come!' 'Go to your house, Odathi. I shall come there soon,' she replied.

Nagaveni took everyone with her and went into her house. When she stepped on the river bank, it was like walking on a bed of flowers. 'Rama, do you remember whose house this is?' she asked. Rama went into the yard, then ran into the verandah and lay down there. Bachchi swept and mopped the floor.

The early morning sun was on the yard. The house appeared empty. Nagaveni felt as if all the tiles, grass, trees and walls were sulking and asking her if she had come to see their present state. Bachchi brought some milk in a brass pot and said, 'Amma, this is Kapila's milk. Give some to the children.' Nagaveni called them and poured some fresh milk into the mouths of Chidananda, Jaya and Rama. 'Ramu, this is the milk from our cow,' she said. 'Amma, is this our house? Is this what you call Kodi?' he asked. 'Really, child! Have you forgotten everything?' she asked in return.

Bachchi's husband brought Kapila and her two calves into the yard to show her. 'Amma, this is the three-year-old female calf and this other one was born this year,' said Bachchi. 'Kapila,' Nagaveni called. The cow heard the voice that came from somewhere. Though she couldn't recognise Nagaveni's face, it rushed to her on hearing the voice. Rama said, 'Amma, watch, the cow is coming to pierce you with its horns.' 'Will Kapila ever harm me?' said Nagaveni.

There was great sorrow starting to simmer within her then. She thought she might start crying and she asked Rama to take the children to the sea. 'Is there a sea here?' he asked. 'You have forgotten everything,' she said and spoke to Kaala. 'Kaala, take the children to the sea. These are children from the city. Let them take a look at the sea.' Everyone was eager to go. Bachchi and Nagaveni sat facing each other. 'Bachchi, he cut us off from this land,' Nagaveni said, and cried. Bachchi too was tearful. 'Amma, the debt we owe to land, to water, is there only if Brahma wills. Not otherwise.

Anyway, you are happy there. The child has found a good place. Could you have survived here? Look at us. We were born of this soil and grew up here. Even then, we don't know how to spend time. How could you have managed to live here?' Nagaveni opened the door, went in and came out many times. She looked into the puja room, now without an idol, without lamps, shut the door and came out. Finally, she sighed and asked Bachchi who was now living in Upadhyaya's house. 'Subraya Upadhyaya died. His son and daughter-in-law are now in Kundapura. Only his wife stays on here, looking after the house and determined to die here. There is no cultivation. Her son comes often and brings her rice and other provisions.'

Nagaveni went to Upadhyaya's house with Bachchi to see his wife. The old woman saw Nagaveni. 'Look at my state. Couldn't I have died before him?' she said and wept. It was Nagaveni's turn to console her. The old woman insisted on her having lunch. 'There is nothing but goddu saaru and rice. If you eat before you leave, my soul will feel happy. I wish I had seen your child,' she said. Nagaveni said she would come the next day as she could not bring all the people who had come with her.

Along the way, she saw the plains and the honné grove. She asked why the pods were not being gathered. 'People now burn kerosene-lamps and there is not much demand for honné oil. They use a little for lighting lamps before God,' she was told. Nagaveni was eager to gather information about Mayya's household, but she didn't want to go there herself. She merely asked, 'Who is living in their house?' 'There?' said Bachchi. 'Lately, the eldest son has been looking after the house. It seems that his business was hit hard by his brother who also sold everything here and left the village. Last year or the year before, your husband came, stayed for a few days and left. It seems he came to our house and threatened my husband.'

Nagaveni came back and sat in the verandah. 'If these children had returned, we could have gone back to Airodi quickly. I could have come alone tomorrow,' she thought. But the band of monkeys did not get back from the sea until the ground heated up in the sun.

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By the time she went back home with the children, evening had fallen. In the heat of the sun everyone's face was as red as the thondé fruit. They walked on without talking and reached home. After eating, the children went off to their own games and Nagaveni's mind was full of her house. Even when the others had slept after dinner, she could think of nothing else. How sweet the moment was when she sat in her house! How much peace there was! The place had been nothing short of heaven but for the fire that burned in the pit of her stomach. As night set in, she called Rama who was making a lot of noise in the verandah and said, 'I have spread the bed. Why don't you come and sleep?' She lay down quite close to him. In a moment the light went off. The memory of her house came back to Nagaveni even as she tried to sleep.

Rama said quietly, 'Amma, can we go to Kodi tomorrow as well? How beautiful our house is!'

'You naughty boy! Which is your house? You don't remember a thing.'

'Yes, Amma. It seemed like that the moment I went there, but from then on, I started remembering things one by one. Though I couldn't recollect when I saw the house, I felt it was all mine.'

'What did you do in the sea? Did you bathe?'

'No, Amma, Anna wanted to but I got scared. I sat by the sea drawing pictures. No, no. I scribbled, as you say. I scribbled and the sea erased it.'

'I too have sat there scribbling like a fool, like you. I had even challenged the waves of the sea. Can we win against it?'

'Let it be. Amma, can we go to the sea again? What if we stay there for a couple of days? You say it is our house.'

'Let's see.'

As soon as morning broke, Nagaveni spoke to her uncle, packed some beaten rice and curds, and left. The other children also started off but her uncle scolded them. 'Who will look after you when you go to the river and the sea? For Rama, it is home.' Though Nagaveni said they could also come, inside her there was a strong desire for peace and silence. Eventually, according to her uncle's orders, those who crossed the river and reached Kodi were only mother and son. They said nothing to each other till they reached home and even after that.

Bachchi came again to see them. Cold milk arrived for Rama to drink. This time, Bachchi brought some dry twigs to boil the milk. After the milk was boiled, Rama expressed his desire to go to the sea. Bachchi asked if she could go with them as well, since she was free. They first informed Upadhyaya's wife about their arrival and then went on to the seashore. They went to the place where the river and the sea met. Nearby was the spot where Nagaveni had thought long ago that she would go on a voyage. She remembered the old times. But there, instead of the estuary, was now a vast sandy bank. As she stopped there, Bachchi said, 'Amma, why did you stop here? The estuary is still far away.' Nagaveni laughed and narrated her life's story. The only thing that Rama did at the time was to stare at his mother's face. Faces of elders who had carried and fondled him flashed in his mind and disappeared. They returned from the spot and Aithu Poojari's coconut grove came into view. Nagaveni asked who owned it now. Bachchi didn't know. Nagaveni turned and said, 'Rama, your grandfather had bought it. Your father sold it off.' She had never spoken to her son about his father. Rama then asked where he was. 'Why do you ask, child?' she said, showing her disinterest.

They all came back to the honné grove behind the house. Kapila was lying down there in the shade. She got up when she saw Nagaveni. When they sat down, Kapila stood there licking her arm, tickling her. Seeing the affection showed by the cow, Nagaveni said, 'Bachchi, how much love and memory these dumb animals have!' The honné flowers had bloomed and were fragrant. The withered flowers had fallen down and

the ground was a mat of flowers. Who knew how long Bachchi and Nagaveni talked about their lives in that beautiful spot? Rama sat with hands pressed against the ground and listened to everything that was said. 'Amma, do you want to stay here?' he asked openly and Nagaveni looked at his face. 'Is it possible to live where we want to? We should live according to the will of Brahma,' she said. What could Rama say in reply? 'Amma, isn't this house more beautiful than the one in Mangalore?' he asked.

'Yes.'

Bachchi remembered what her family used to talk of. 'Amma, don't think I am being mischievous. My father-in-law used to say when he was alive that Rama Aithala was a very rich man. He must have buried money somewhere or the other. Angry with his son, he died without saying where it was. Is that true, Amma? Then there must be money somewhere in the house. You may find it if you are lucky.'

Nagaveni had heard that her father-in-law used to hide cash in cracks in the wall. But the rest of the information was new. How could she have faith in such dreams of hidden money? 'Bachchi, what he gave with his own hands could not be saved because of my bad luck. How can I trip over a treasure pot?'

'Even if you don't find it, isn't this boy his grandson? He could find it.'

'You are being foolish, Bachchi. Each one of us gets what he works for. How can we get something we didn't work for?'

It was getting late. They came home, and quenched their thirst with Kapila's milk. Not being sure how long it would take for the old woman to cook a meal, they ate some of the beaten rice and curds. Before they could finish, they heard someone call 'Nagaveni.' Upadhyaya's wife had come to call them for the meal. 'I thought you might have forgotten and so I came to call you,' she said.

Was there any limit to the hospitality she showed that day? She served them with happala, sandigé, rice, saaru,

gojju — what she would have taken a month to finish. When asked why she had prepared so much food, she said, 'Do you come here everyday? Who knows when the child will come here again?'

'Why? Rama may want to live in his own house and come back to Kodi.'

'What? Leaving the town and coming here? When people here get fed up and head towards the town? Should they come here wanting to eat palya made from avadé greens? Have you seen our village now? As soon as boys go through Upanayana, they run to Bangalore. Now this is a place for girls and blind old people like me, or those who have no way out. I told our Kitta, "Enough of your hotel. Let us cultivate the little land we have and live." But he stays on in Kundapura, wanting to live well. Once in a while I feel that when I die, there will be no one even to give him the news.'

'Why don't you go and stay there?' asked Nagaveni.

'Amidst all that impurity? How can I remain unaffected in a place where all sorts of people come and go? I shall chant Rama-Rama and die here when the time comes. Those things don't suit old-fashioned people like me.'

Conversation went on for a long time. Nagaveni started off with her son. 'Amma,' said Rama, 'Let us go to the sea again.' By the time they went there it was evening and the sky had turned gold. 'It's getting late, let's go,' she said. Rama turned back and showed her the moon. 'Amma, should we be afraid? There is the moon above.'

'Yes. If he moves up high, the river will be in tide. Crossing will become difficult.'

'If so, we shall sleep here. It's hot in the house. There is no need to spread anything on the ground. Ajji's food has filled me right up to the neck.'

Anyway, Rama stayed there till the sun set. Even his mother was longing to see the sight. They went back to Airodi, remembering how late it was. They were very happy to walk back on the sands in the moonlight. The fronds of the palm

trees rustled as if they were singing in response to the lullaby of the sea breeze. The beach, the house and the main gate seemed to join the coconut trees bathed in the moonlight in asking them where they were going instead of staying on. 'Amma, let's stay here. We shall go to the sea again and then go back,' Rama insisted. Nagaveni called Bachchi and asked her to sleep in the house. She sent Bachchi's husband to Airodi to say they wouldn't be returning that night. It was better to let them know, she thought.

They sat that night in the verandah with a dim light which Bachchi had brought. Finding that they had not eaten, she ran home and brought milk that was left over. She teased them by asking if they had palmyra fruit in Mangalore, while placing some before them after prising them out of the shell. Rama ate them with relish, exclaiming, 'How tasty!'

The two women sat before the flickering light for a long time. Then, feeling drowsy, they lay down there. Rama too slept. All night there was the music of the coconut fronds and palm leaves with the sea providing the shruthi, the base note.

It was a peaceful night without dreams. With the first light of morning. Bachchi got up and went home. She had to pound the paddy which had been roasted the night before and make rice. She reached home and started threshing rice as she sang. Nagaveni and Rama slept late as they did in town. Instead of waking up early, they got up only at seven to find that the weather had changed. A cool breeze was blowing and the sun had already risen in the east. But the sky in the west was covered with a black blanket. Rama came out and saw the rainbow in the west. 'Amma,' he called out, 'Amma, let us go to the sea. It will be beautiful now,' he pleaded. 'What if it rains?' Nagaveni asked, being unsure of the weather. 'That will make it more exciting,' Rama said. So they both went to the beach. There was a huge canopy of clouds above. In between, a curved festoon of seven colours. The whole scene looked as if the rain God Varuna had decided to take on the role of a father-in-law at the wedding of an angel!

They reached the sea and feasted their eyes on it. A couple of raindrops fell. The sun grew brighter and the clouds

changed from black to brown and again to grey. Eventually, they absorbed all the sun's heat and it was as if Nagaveni's and Rama's bodies were burning. 'The morning sun is hot, let's go,' Nagaveni said.

They turned back and went homewards. On the way, Rama asked, 'Amma, why did we leave the house and go to Mangalore?' 'Who is here for us? They all passed away,' she said, triggering off some old memories. She told him about Atté, Doddatté, Mava and everyone else. She said nothing about her husband but Rama himself asked, 'Won't Appayya come back home again?' 'If he was all right, would we be tossed around here and there like this?' she said wearily.

They reached Airodi. Nagaveni could not see the house or the sea again. Narayanayya asked her if she had been to her house. 'It seems your husband had come last year. People say that he destroyed Orata's property totally. Who knows how much truth or falsehood there is in that rumour? However, I hear that they are together again after having finished Mysore and Bangalore, and have started a hotel in Vijayanagara.'

'Orata's wife and children?'

'They are in the same state as you are. Orata kept nothing here and so she has been thrown back to her father's. The parents don't have enough even for themselves and are in a bad state because she has joined them with her three children. Orata for Sheena Mayya and Lachcha for Rama Aithala! A perfect pair like the Kambala bulls roped together for the race. How do you find Mangalore? Don't you also feel that any other place is better than our wretched place here? The harassment, the opposition, the pin-pricks — one can't say enough about them.'

'As far as I am concerned, I never spend a day without thinking of home, Chikkappa. If I was alone, I would have stayed on in Kodi. But what can Rama do there? Can he sow, harvest and make manure and carry on?'

'You talk of Rama. Now we can't even see any men, not even a male worm, here. At the time of ploughing, they come

from Bangalore, Haveri or some other place. Once they leave after the sowing, they come back only for harvesting. After that they disappear for eight months. They arrive only if there is a wedding or Upanayana.'

Conversation was over and they went back to their own chores. Within a couple of days, Vasudevayya's family went to Kodiyala and Nagaveni and Rama went there with them. Holidays were over and Rama carried on with the school routine. Nagaveni remembered her stringed instrument. She took out her anger and revenge on the bow and strings. Her teacher didn't come home anymore. She played the way she knew. Violin Subraya's hands trembled as soon as he held the violin. He was quite old and his fingers shook. So, she herself went to his house once in a while and played in his presence. 'I am not upset. All those who learnt from me put the violin in the attic after marriage. Like Gandhi's charaka. You are the only one playing at this age. Anyone who listens to your playing will never forget me. You at least are still playing. That's enough for me,' he said.

Nagaveni was very happy. No one listened to her violin at her own home. Though Rama sometimes told her that she played well, she didn't pay much attention to it, thinking he said so because of his love for her. Now, the teacher himself had praised her. Which disciple wouldn't be happy?

When she went there the next time, Subraya said that she should play at least once before a few people. 'Is it to get praise or earn money?' she asked. 'It is not like that. Our people don't know how much our own people are worth. Even if a worthless animal comes from outside, they think it's an angel.'

Subraya's insistence bore fruit two years later. Mohanaraya's violinist friend Raghavendraraya had come to Mangalore again. So, her brother Sadashiva planned to invite him to his house and make his sister's talent and learning public. He decided to have a party and invited some friends. Nagaveni herself didn't know who had been invited. The old man, Subraya, sat beside her chewing paan and counting the

beat. Rama was playing the thambura. Nagaveni was playing one song after another, head bent throughout. After playing for two hours, someone called out 'Thodi.' Nagaveni started playing the raga. It was a particularly moving raga for her. Subraya sat in front and nodded his head in appreciation. A sweetness and waves of feeling which he hadn't experienced before, emanated from her playing. In between, Nagaveni lifted her head — possibly wanting to see who had asked for the raga. She tried to look with half-closed eyes. Suddenly, her hand became still. She had found out that it was the lawyer who had played that day long ago and aroused in her the desire and thirst for music.

'Why did you stop? asked Subraya.

'Can I fool around in his presence?' she asked in reply.

Subraya too looked at the gathering before him. He didn't know the stranger.

'My playing is enough. I want to listen to him,' said Nagaveni. When her brother asked her why she had stopped, she said, 'Shouldn't we listen to him play?' All his friends encouraged him. Then Raghavendraraya took Nagaveni's violin and carried on expanding Thodi raga. He played on, and later went right into the depths of his Hindusthani Bhairavi. Subraya said, 'Bhesh!'quietly. As soon as the performance was over, Nagaveni's brother called the lawyer and said, 'This is your gift. She heard you playing the other day and started learning again.' He introduced Subraya as her teacher. Subraya waited to hear what the lawyer would say. 'Amma, you have passed through a great experience. You and your teacher are both great,' he said. Nagaveni felt shy. Later, Raghavendraraya talked to Subraya for a long time. 'It is not difficult to learn music. A part of it is learnt through practice. But the heart of the player should come from him alone. Every movement of her bow seems to express some sorrow within. I never knew you were such a great man. When can I hear you play?' he asked. 'It has been three years since my hands gave up on me. But as soon as I touch the violin, my hands come alive again. I am also ageing like a dog. I am seventy,' Subraya said. 'Why

do you say so?' asked Raghavendraraya sadly. 'What else is the lot of one who learns music in order to earn a living?' Subraya said. Behind his words could be felt the sting of the poverty he had known.

The next day, Raghavendraraya went to Subraya's house. He sent for Nagaveni and made her sing. At the end he said, 'I don't know when I will be back. However, I can't forget the melody I heard from you today.' As he was going out, he wrapped a shawl he had brought around Subraya and touched his feet. Subraya had tears in his eyes. 'Even my children did not show me respect like this. Why do you do it? That too, scholars like you...?' he asked.

They were words said in courtesy. But when the men took leave of each other, they were like members of one family. Even in the kingdom of music, filled with jealousies, they bade farewell like relatives who were full of flawless love and kinship.

The musical episode blended into Nagaveni's life as if it was nothing new. She had to be a teacher to Mohanaraya's children and her brother's children as well. Rama would also play on the strings when he felt like it. But his practice had the fickleness of a child's fascination.

Everything has its own beauty. So has music, and it was true that it would spread some of it around. But would it alone be able to pluck out the pain in life? Who knew? Nagaveni didn't know the answer to the question.

Two more events branded her anew. Within a year, her teacher died. Nagaveni stood crying like a daughter near his deathbed. In accordance with his wish, the shawl Raghavendraraya had given him the other day covered his body. There were times when Nagaveni turned indifferent towards the violin, thinking about his life of suffering and lack of recognition. When he was gone, where was the need for music? But she had to surrender to it again. She had no other way to spend time.

The following year, another incident happened that shook her very foundations. One day, Vasudevayya sat for puja,

complained of chest pain and lay down. Sons came rushing when they got the information. One of them was a doctor. He examined his father and gave him an injection. 'Anna,' he said, 'It is useless giving him any medication. I think his time has come.' Nagaveni controlled her grief so that her mother could do the same.

Within a month, Nagaveni went to her big brother's house along with her mother. Though the new place didn't seem different to Rama, her brother's house could never become hers. Nor was it her father's. Though a couple of months went off smoothly, the mistress of the house didn't feel that the new dispensation was satisfactory. So, many a time, her dissatisfaction found expression in quiet insinuations. It didn't go unnoticed either by Nagaveni or her mother.

It does not take much to report that Rama had spent six years with his mother after his grandfather's death without any worry and that he had studied and finished his Matric. But how can one find words to describe how his mother spent all that time in that house, saying nothing, swallowing her pain? Perhaps one could understand it if one was acquainted with her daily violin playing which brought out all the unexpressed pain in her.

Sadashiva had a fairly good income. Apart from his property, he earned two hundred rupees a month. Was it enough for his family of five children? The eldest boy Chidananda was studying in Inter. Another was to finish his school finals that year. The younger ones were all of school-going age. The number of children might increase in future. He was bearing the weight of Rama's education and the responsibility for his mother and sister, all out of a sense of duty and not because he could afford it. His wife Lalitha often harassed him. 'Why don't they go and stay with your younger brother for a few days? Or in Airodi? How much burden can we bear?' she would complain.

Lalitha's disapproval knew no bounds when Rama needed twelve rupees to take the school final examination. 'Tell me, how much can we go on giving? Chidananda also has to sit for

the examination.' Unfortunately, Nagaveni sitting in the next room heard her words. She went to the other brother the same evening and asked him for twelve rupees and got it. She felt consoled just for a day but her big brother's displeasure remained. He didn't think it was right on her part to have asked his younger brother for the money without having told him. Lalitha had hidden the fact that she was the reason for what had happened, and so the pain of his sister's insult remained in him. Even after knowing how her brother felt, Nagaveni wouldn't complain about his wife. 'We are under her obligation and shouldn't do anything to start a fight between her and her husband,' she told herself.

After Rama's examination was over, she felt like going home. More than that, she thought she could at least keep away for a few days from her sister-in-law's meals that were served as though they were a favour. She told her mother the same. Her brother arranged to send them all home.

Mother, daughter and Rama arrived at Airodi. But what joy could they find there? Was Narayanappa's family a small one? However, no one hurt them there, for they had come down only for a few days. The very next day, Nagaveni insisted on going home. 'Amma, when have you come to my house? Have you come this way after my wedding? Let us go to Kodi once,' Nagaveni said.

Rama was a young man of sixteen whose last visit to Kodi was when he was ten. His desire to travel around and see places was greater than before. The opportunity to travel had come when he was feeling fed up with having studied a lot for his examination. It was not possible for Nagaveni's mother to walk all the way with them as she had grown old, living in the town. But how could she resist the desire to see her daughter's house with her own eyes? As a result, they all sat in a boat for her sake, even though the water was just about knee high and reached the other bank of the river. They crossed the field and walked towards home. 'Bachchi,' Nagaveni called from there. She couldn't hear the call. Instead, her children came out and told her that somebody had gone to Aithala's house. Which spirit could go into the house which

was anyway locked? If at all anyone came, it should be the mistress. With that in mind, Bachchi rushed over there. She was as old as Nagaveni. Though Nagaveni's mind had been pulverised, her body had not lost its strength. Bachchi, on the other hand, looked twenty years older, having borne ten children by then. She had brought her grandchild, a girl, with her. Bachchi's voice, talk, and walk were that of a person who had climbed the final step in the journey of life.

'How are you, Bachchi?' asked Nagaveni.

'What can I say, Odathi? Just counting the hours. He is never free from disease. The house is full of children. We eat one meal a day and are still breathing somehow. Is this the young master? How nice he looks!' Bachchi said.

Nagaveni's mother asked who Bachchi was. 'She is one of our workers. Our annual lease has been sub-leased to them. We made the arrangement so that the land could stay with us at least in name. That way, our right can also be preserved. Amma, I could have stayed on here instead of eating other people's gruel,' Nagaveni said.

'Yes, Nagu. I didn't like my son's house either. I was also counting the hours and asking myself the same question. Why should we put others in difficulty? I cannot accept the fact that I should be obligated to my daughter-in-law for food. That was why he set up separate houses for them. After he passed away, things went back to where they were before.'

Nagaveni wondered about Upadhyaya's wife. 'Bachchi, the grandmother in Upadhyaya's house — is she still alive?'

Bachchi said, 'Amma, can one live for ever? Wasn't she very old? She died last year in the rainy season. There was not even a spirit in the house when she died. Someone walking along the road saw the body, and the son in Kundapura had to be sent for.'

'Amma, that grandmother had told me when I came here last that the pillar in the house would be her only support at the time of death! It turned out to be just like that.'

'Amma, shall I go for a walk? To the seaside?' Rama asked, and his mother said yes. He went on his own, his clothes flying, walked over the beach, crossed the field and reached the seashore. He counted the seagulls sitting in a line along the beach. He chased the crabs and made them hide in their holes. Eventually, he saw from a distance the big boats with big nets being pulled by the Padukeré folk, and went near them. He watched with amazement as the people pulled in the nets with plentiful fish in them. He felt sorry for the sea snakes thrown out from among the heaps of fish, struggling in the sand, unable to breathe. He saw hawks swooping down and snatching them away. The strange hunt and games played between the fishermen and the hawks hovering over the catch, begging for a share, fascinated him. It was the fight for life among the creatures dependent on the sea that captured his mind more than the superficial vitality of the sea. The sun rose high as he kept watching and his face and body reddened with the heat. He was getting hungry, and so, walked home in a hurry. Looking at the never-ending path, he laughed and marvelled at the way it seemed to be stretching on.

'Amma,' he said when he came back. 'Who can walk back to Airodi now? If we can get some coconut or hané bonda we can eat and stay on here for the afternoon.' When his mother said he could swim in the tank, he was surprised. Soon after he left, a servant from Airodi brought some stuff for cooking and a couple of mats. The reason was that Narayanappa had agreed to Nagaveni's wish to stay back in Kodi for a couple of days. But he had given her one warning. 'Your monkey of a son should not bathe in the sea or near the estuary.' Rama had also said that he would not go into the sea. He had put some sea water into his mouth, felt nauseated, and spat it out. Though he wished to step on the undulating sea, his heart would tremble in fear at the roaring waves. He would get startled and draw back. The trust he had in the sea during childhood had disappeared completely in his youth.

Mother and daughter sat watching till the boy's bath was over. They spread the banana leaves that Bachchi had brought and wondered why Rama was taking so much time.

Their hungry stomachs were grumbling. When they sat down for the meal, mother said it was just gruel. 'It is our luck that we have at least that!' said Rama. However, their hunger gave the pepper-and-salt meal they had that day the relish of a feast. It brought back to Nagaveni all the joy of her earlier life. As she ate with her eyes closed, she said, 'Amma, we have not felt like this for so long. Why did God have to push me into being obliged to others?' Her mother consoled her. 'The food given to you by your brother is not something given by "others." You shouldn't say so. Your sister-in-law belongs to another household. How can she see Rama in the same way as she sees her own children?' she said.

They were prepared for such 'picnic' meals for three days. Rama would think of it as life in a camp and wandered around the village, sea, and estuary. There were cashew trees if he was hungry – the nuts and the fruits, too. If he was hungry he would ask his mother to roast the nuts. There would be kesuvé chutney, sweet potato bajji and vegetables by the kind courtesy of Bachchi. In the peaceful atmosphere of those three days, even Nagaveni's mother said they could have stayed on but for the child. 'There is no one here to ask questions about anything you do. We are under no obligation to anyone. We have eaten well, we have worn good clothes. Now all we need is something to make gruel.'

'Our Kapila's calf is there. Bachchi might give it back. There is a little buttermilk and I want to eat a meal without asking anyone else for it. But who knows what Rama wants, or wants to do? What if he wants to study further?'

The next day, after a long time, Nagaveni too went to the seaside with her son in the evening. She finished cooking, asked her mother to rest, and left. By the time they reached the seashore, the sun had grown large and red in the empty sky and was playing hide-and-seek. The red sun made their faces shine. Right before the sandy beach on which they sat, a few fishermen were passing along with nets in their hands. They stared at them, wondering who the strangers were, and disappeared without showing much interest. The evening light grew dull and then disappeared.

The sight of waves folding, breaking, falling, coming forward and disappearing suddenly like sparks from a fire enchanted Rama. He rushed towards the water. He scratched the ground with his feet. Wherever there was friction from the feet, there was a shower of lightning from the phosphorus in the water. 'Amma, how beautiful this is! I don't remember seeing this at all,' Rama said. 'This happens when the sea water dries up in the heat of summer. The same thing happens in the river as well. It is getting late, let's go home,' his mother said.

They started back. The mother asked him, 'Do you like our village now?'

'Why, Amma?'

'I feel we could stay on here. Why should we be obligated to others?'

'Amma, how lovely this place is! We have our own house. We can, of course, stay on here. But if we stay here, how can we feed ourselves in future?'

'Do you mean to say that we should stay in your uncle's house?'

'Not that, Amma. Somehow, I can't bring myself to say it. They are under a strain if we stay there. Why should we be there, like a burden to others? I have, anyway, decided to go elsewhere for my Intermediate course. Not Mangalore.'

'Where will you go?'

'I don't want Mangalore. I don't know where else. If I get through B.A. somehow, I can do something or the other. If I take up a job now, I won't even get fifteen rupees.'

'If you can stay on your own, we can manage here somehow. Your Ajji has some money in her name which was left by Appa. We both shall stay here , making do with gruel if nothing else. We can stay here without having to listen to anyone's comments. Chikkappa may help as usual. I am more worried about you than about myself. Who knows how much money is needed for your B.A.? Who will give it? How much help can Sadashiva offer?'

'Let's see, Amma. Something or the other will turn up.' So she came back with the son who had a trust in the unseen future and who spoke with the growing hopes of youth. Once again, at meal time, there was a repetition of all that had been said before on the way back home.

They had to leave the next morning for Airodi. Food that had been brought home for the time being was over, and they had to talk to Narayanappa about their staying back permanently. Nagaveni called Bachchi the next morning. 'Bachchi, we may come back. If we do, will you give us a calf?' she asked. 'Amma, if I don't give you what is yours, what will God say?' Bachchi replied.

Within a couple of days of their return, Nagaveni's mother told her brother-in-law what she wanted to do. Narayanappa was surprised. 'How can you agree to your daughter's madness?' he asked. She said, 'No, you don't know. I am going to die soon. I am concerned that I am even now under someone else's obligation for a meal.' Many words were spoken after that. Narayanappa felt certain that the natural domestic frictions in Sadashiva's house must have hurt her and her daughter. He said, 'Attigé, I don't really mind. Anna has made arrangements for you to get a hundred rupees a month and so there is no need for you to worry. A hundred rupees is a great deal of money in Kodi and I am always here if you ever run short. But who will look after Rama in future? He is a boy who hasn't seen his father's face. Will he agree to stay far away from his mother?'

'Don't worry about Rama. He can look after himself. He has also had enough of Mangalore. Moreover, my brother has looked after us for six years. What more can he do ?' Nagaveni said.

Within eight days, the pots and pans which had gone to Airodi twelve years ago came back to Kodi. Narayanappa's servants cleaned the house and smeared clay on the walls, repaired the cowshed and went back. The very next day, after the jobs were done, Nagaveni went to Kodi in great excitement. Rama said, 'Amma, after you came here, your violin has gone

up to the attic. You haven't touched it at all.' Nagaveni smiled and said, 'No, I don't think I will be able to spend time without it.' Carrying the violin case on his shoulder, Rama set out on the journey to Kodi with them.

Within a mere two days of arriving in Kodi, Nagaveni went about as if it had been their house all along and they had never moved out. Narayanappa came, hobbling, to see how they had settled down. 'It's fine that we are here. But we shall have nothing to do with cultivation,' said Nagaveni with a laugh. 'What? Amma farming?' laughed Rama. 'You fool! Your mother has worked in the fields carrying you in her arms. What do you know?' said Narayanappa, teasing the boy.

Summer holidays were almost over. Rama was wandering around distracted. Uncertainty about what he would do next kept his mind in a state of turmoil. Even the leaves of the Gaali tree on the beach were not as disorderly. Where could he stay, apart from Mangalore? Madras? It was quite a convenient place. But since he didn't know how much money he would need to stay there, he was apprehensive. Amidst all this, a letter came from Sadashiva asking how his mother and sister were and what plans Rama had for the future. Narayanappa wrote back without giving many details.

'Nagaveni says she will stay on in Kodi from now on. Rama is still here and we don't know what he will do next. Anyway, no one is thinking of coming back to Mangalore.' The last words of the letter hurt Sadashiva very much. The letter made him feel that such a decision was made because his mother too didn't like living in his house. He had to tell his wife that his mother too was angry because of the way she had spoken. But all those things belonged to the past. He talked to his younger brother and sent a reply. 'Chikkappa, they must be upset with us. Never mind. Rama at least could have come here. If he stops his studies half way, it may be difficult in the future. The days are gone when a mere S.S.L.C. would do. It would be good for him to finish his B.A. at least. My brother and I will give him ten rupees a month. Let him do as he wishes.'

Rama understood the summary of the letter. 'Amma, I don't think I want their ten rupees,' he said. 'How can you continue with your studies without asking someone for money? If you get ten rupees, it will make things that much easier,' said his grandmother. They could neither let the money go nor think of taking it. So, no decision was taken on the matter.

At the beginning of June, Rama took leave of his mother. 'Amma, don't worry about me. I shall continue my education somehow. I won't write to you till I settle down somewhere. You must not worry at all.' he said. That night, Nagaveni sat her son beside her and told him what her husband had done from the time he had married her till the present day. She cried as she spoke. 'My child, he abandoned me. I don't care about myself. But I am living only for you. If you too were to desert me....' Wouldn't she be filled with such grief when she had to let him go far away the very next day?

Rama's hair stood on end when he heard about the destruction that his house in Kodi had suffered. He was furious when he heard about his cruel father whom he could not even remember. His heart melted at the story of his mother's suffering. As if he had just realised who he really was, he wept before his mother like a calf. 'Amma, trust me. I will never do what he did,' he promised, putting his hand on hers. Nagaveni hugged her son. The next morning, he fell at his grandmother's feet, kissed his mother's cheek, said farewell to Bachchi and the female workers he had come to know during those few days, and crossed the river. On reaching Airodi, he talked for a long time with his grandfather.

'One of my classmates is going to Madras. He has passed the same examination. He has asked me to go with him. I believe that there are a lot of people from our town in Madras.' Narayanappa admired his courage. 'Yes. Go, but don't forget your grandmother and mother,' he said, blessing him. He put thirty rupees in Rama's hand for expenses on the way. 'Write after you reach there. We shall do something if you face difficulties. I am also constrained because of my family obligations. But, whatever happens, never give up your studies,' he said and sent him off with his blessings.

The next evening Rama reached Mangalore. He didn't even go to his uncle's house for dinner. He didn't show his face to anyone but just met a teacher of his. He went to his school and got a certificate. Obtaining a couple of letters of introduction, he left for Madras on the second day by train.

All alone and knowing no one, Rama became Ramaraya and travelled, putting his head out of the window once in a while, watching the fields around. Night fell. His mind was empty as the sky, even as he slept in the carriage. Everything was new to him. It was all a game of uncertainty. When the station in Madras arrived, he rolled up his bed and stepped down, carrying it. He carried his luggage himself despite the coolies offering to carry it, came to the gate and handed over the ticket. He was immersed in thoughts about where to go, and to whom.

It was true that his friend said he would reach Madras earlier. It was also true that he had given his address. Rama hoped his friend had indeed come. But what if he hadn't? Who knew how long he stood there with fingers on his lips, watching trams and buses full of people going past.

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Rama indeed stood for a very long time at the entrance of the railway station, looking at the main road. He waited, hoping that he would see someone he knew or someone from his town. He got fed up and eventually asked somebody if there was a choultry nearby, and reached one. The place was filled and overflowing with pilgrims, beggars and unemployed people. It filled him with disgust and he wondered whether his bedroll and his money would be safe there. Whom could he trust if he stayed in that place? Whenever he went in or out, he had to keep a hand in his pocket.

The afternoon passed and evening fell. He started wandering around looking for street-names he had heard of. He tried to use the letters of introduction given by his teachers. They were useful for entrance into college but not for finding accommodation.

Disappointed, he found out where the college was and eventually reached the Thiruvallikeni beach. The sea was spread out there, wide and beautiful. There was a mat of sand spread before it. When he went and stood there, he saw sweet dreams of his village. But the crowds, the group of beggars and the cars running around! He could find no peace. Once he had come, what could he do? He went in front of Presidency College and sat on a sand heap, watching. He started dreaming that, if he was lucky enough, he would live there. The dream was strong enough to overcome the noise of the marketplace. At that very moment, someone thumped him hard on his shoulder and called, 'Rama.' He was frightened, as if a tiger had sprung on him. 'What are you doing here?' He looked back and saw his aunt's husband Madhava. He had brought his two children to the beach. Rama hadn't even remembered that his aunt was in Madras. He felt strongly that he should have nothing to do with relatives. But, at that moment, he was overjoyed to see Madhava's face. He told Madhava his story and said that he was looking for a place to stay but hadn't found one. Madhava smiled. 'What's this? Isn't there enough room in your aunt's house for you? Wouldn't I have come to the railway station if you had written to me? Even Sadashiva didn't write to us about your coming.' Saying this, he dragged Rama to Mylapura and dropped the children there. 'Where are your things? Let's bring them over,' he said. Both went to the choultry but there was nothing there to take back. The room which he had locked had opened on its own. His bedroll which he had left in the room was missing. Rama's face fell.

'I hope there was no money in it,' Madhava said.

'Money is in my pocket. There was just a bed and a few clothes. What can I do with no other clothes to wear?'

His mind was struck by the harshness of an unknown place. Madhava thumped him on his back as if nothing had happened. 'See, this is the penalty you pay for not telling me about your coming,' he said with a laugh.

'Yes,' agreed Rama.

On the way back, Madhava told him how he had been transferred to Madras from Andhra Pradesh the previous month 'This place is more convenient than that. We find here a lot of people from our own place.'

Krishnaveni looked after him very well. After they had dinner, she asked him whether her mother and sister were in Mangalore. Rama narrated what had happened. She was not surprised at all. 'Yes, it was all right as long as Appa was alive. What is left now? Nagu is a strong woman, she can survive in a wasteland. But for Amma, at her age, the place may turn out to be like Cannanooru jail.'

The next day, Rama was provided with clothes. He was asked about his future. There was no way of knowing how much help he could get from Madhava who was earning one hundred and fifty rupees a month and had to look after a large family with quite a few children. But he assured Rama that he wouldn't find it difficult to complete his B.A. if he could get some help from Mangalore.

Whenever Madhava went to his office, Rama busied himself using the letters of introduction. He also wanted to find out where he could get some financial assistance, and so he wandered in search of it. His admission to a college was done quite easily. Later, making up his mind not to ask for money for fees and things, he went to a couple of people from Mangalore and fixed a couple of houses where he could give tuition. He decided to teach a few small children and earn twenty rupees. Madhava knew of it and was happy. 'But, Rama, what will happen to your studies if you are teaching others?' he asked, and Rama laughed.

Rama didn't write home for two months. Before that, Sadashiva had found out that Rama was in Madras and written a letter in disgust. Rama didn't reply and even sent back the twenty rupees that had been sent to him through Madhava. 'I don't need any help from my people from now onwards,' he wrote. Krishnaveni told her husband all that she had come to know, and so Rama's behaviour didn't appear to be all that

surprising. However, he said one thing. 'Rama, if you are in trouble, don't keep it from your aunt.'

Once Madhava asked him if he had written home. Rama said no. Madhava said nothing then, but he said to his wife, 'Is he angry with his own family? How worried his mother must be! You write to your sister, at least.'

Krishnaveni wrote to her mother about Rama. 'Why doesn't Rama write to me?' came the reply. When she handed the letter to the boy, he laughed. When his aunt went on asking him why he behaved that way, he said he would tell her if she wasn't going to get angry. 'I will write to her when I am able to earn my living. What can I say in the letter? That I am waiting for someone to feed me? You know why she left Mangalore.' Krishnaveni was upset. 'Child, do you think that I am like your Lalitatté? 'Rama looked at her. 'I don't think so. I lack nothing here. But the suffering I had to endure in Mangalore made me say such things. No man should be under an obligation to another,' he said. Madhava was amazed at Rama's way of thinking.

Eventually, Rama came to Krishnaveni on his own. 'Chikkamma, I will tell you something if you promise not to get angry.'

'What?'

'Shouldn't I write to Amma?' he asked.

'You should have done that a long time ago. You have been here for four months.'

'I shall write. I can write now. I won't come here for meals from tomorrow. I shall go to a hotel. Someone is paying me twenty rupees for tutoring. I get ten rupees each from two other sources. I can somehow feed myself with thirty rupees.'

Krishnaveni wasn't pleased. 'Have you made up your mind about it? But you must come and show your face here everyday. You mustn't stay in a strange city without someone you can call your own. If you don't feel very uncomfortable,

come for coffee, come to sleep at least. Our child Ananda thinks about you all the time.'

Rama laughed. 'I shall stay here and eat outside. Let me have the joy of feeding myself. No one has shown me as much love as you have. But I have made up my mind.' Krishnaveni's four year old son heard them talking and came running. 'Won't you come to eat? Then, I won't eat either,' he said. Rama said, 'No, child, I won't eat here.'

The next day Rama was not to be seen at meal time. Madhava was curious and asked what the matter was. 'What can I do? He is determined. But, he isn't doing it in a nasty manner,' Krishnaveni said. When Rama came home that night, Ananda created a commotion. 'Ramanna should eat with us. Otherwise, I won't eat.'

Rama had written in detail to his mother and grandfather telling them about his new place of stay. 'Don't worry about me at all. I won't come home during Christmas. If any money has been saved, it may be possible to come there in summer.' He had posted the letter so that it could catch the evening train itself. But the commotion that Ananda had created bewildered him. However hard he tried to console the child, he wouldn't listen. Madhava too came home and shared the child's distress. Finally, he laughed and suggested a solution. 'Rama, I am not ashamed to say this. Is it necessary to eat in a hotel so that you can tell yourself that you have been able to stick to your decision? Or is it that you have to earn your own food?'

'Why do you say this? Am I doing this just to prove that I am abiding by the oath that I took?'

'Leave it be. How much fine do you pay the hotel?'

'Is it a fine? I pay twelve rupees for meals.'

'Rama, you give us that money and eat here.'

The problem was solved. Madhava had felt very shy to say those words. He also felt that what he had suggested was not in keeping with his sense of dignity. Rama also felt that it was not good paying them for the food he ate. But, because

of the child's obstinacy, he had to be content with having eaten just one meal at a hotel before the new arrangement was put in place.

When the end of the month came, Madhava said, 'Krishni, if Rama gives money, take it. He has no sense. Put it all together and send it your sister. But don't let him know.'

Krishnaveni thought that that was a good plan. She wrote everything in detail to her mother and sister. She also wanted her sister to swear that she would not let Rama know that his money was going to her.

The very day the letter arrived, Nagaveni praised her son's virtues and cried. 'Ayyo, his father didn't have the good fortune to feel happy on seeing how good Rama is.'

Every month, Nagaveni's treasury received twelve rupees. She too learnt to push the money into the cracks in the door frames, the way her father-in-law would, into the cracks in the wall.

Nagaveni had many daydreams about Rama for a long time. Wherever she went, she could see her son before her eyes. She longed for him to come home. She would try to imagine how he had grown and how he would be studying in Madras. In the past, Krishnaveni hadn't written often to her sister. After Rama came to her house, she wrote once a week. She was proud of Rama and thought of him as her own son. Madhava didn't have much time to spend at home. The whole day would be spent slaving in the office. But whenever he was home, not a day passed without him praising Rama at least once. His first child was Ramachandra, the second was Jaya, the third, Sadananda, and the fourth, Ananda. They all waited for their cousin to put his books down. They knew that Sunday was a holiday from tuition. They would tell their father in the morning itself that they would go to the beach with Rama. Ramanna liked playing with them, showing off his seniority. Moreover, it was the seashore. It might not have had the grandeur of the Kodi beach, or its endlessness, or its peace. Nevertheless, it was the same sea with the same fishermen, boats, waves and sand. If there was not such a crowd, if there

were no people competing with the roar of the sea by imagining their cars to be aeroplanes, he could sit there quietly. If there was no one to say 'Sambashiva, alms please,' how much greater would the beauty of the place have been! But he was content with what there was.

March was over. It was eight months since Rama had arrived in Madras. The children realised that Ramanna would be going home in May. 'Ramanna, are you going home next month? Don't leave us and go. You must stay here,' they would plead. Rama was longing to see his mother. But going home meant no income. One had to pay twenty to thirty rupees for buses and trains. Wouldn't he need the money? So, he wrote a letter.

'Amma,

What if I don't come home? Isn't it enough if I come after I finish my Inter? Even the children here are asking me not to go. I also feel that it would mean wasting money.' Nagaveni wrote back saying that he should come home for a few days at least. 'If you get bored staying here, you can always go back. Don't we wish to see you? Shouldn't your grandmother see you? Can life be spent in only playing the violin?'

Therefore, Rama had to go home. He had no money at the time of departure, and Madhava gave him some. He took it most unwillingly and left. One part of the journey was over when he reached Mangalore in the evening. After leaving Madras he wondered where he could spend the night. Shouldn't he visit his uncle? Deciding not to, he hid himself in a hostel and caught the early morning bus.

At the house in Kodi, Nagaveni and her mother were busy in the afternoon. Shouldn't the child be served happala at least? And so, urad was powdered, made into dough and happala was being rolled when Rama came to Airodi at two in the afternoon in the hot sun. He quenched his thirst and left for Kodi, bidding goodbye to his grandmother.

As soon as he came in front of the house, he called out 'Amba' like a young calf, to tease his mother. Nagaveni stopped

what she was doing and came to the yard wondering whether Thungé had not been tied up and had drunk up the milk. She realised that it was not Thungé, the grandchild of Kapila, but her own calf Rama. The recognition that it was her son, and his calling "Amma," merged and made music together.

'Have you had lunch?'

'I don't want to eat. I had something to eat in Airodi.'

'Don't be silly!' said his grandmother. 'Nagu, he doesn't realise anything. If he doesn't eat now at his age, he will find out all the harm done when he grows older. Now he has energy in him and thinks he can afford not to eat. You go and cook.'

Rama held his mother's hand. 'Amma, no. Just by looking at you, I feel as if I have eaten.' Nagaveni poured some oil into the dough she had mixed for making happala and asked him if he would eat it. Rama remembered how he used to eat it when he was young, took it and swallowed it at one go.

There was a festive atmosphere at home that day. The joy of Rama's homecoming danced in every corner of the house. Amidst all the commotion, no one was aware that Thungé had quickly finished drinking Gangé's milk, leaving Rama with none. Soora's daughter-in-law Bachchi came running merely on hearing their loud voices. 'Ayya, young master! When did you come? Is Madras a very big town? Is it like our Hangarakatté?' she asked.

Rama laughed. 'Bachchi, is Madras bigger than Kodi? It doesn't even have as many people. Just three or four lakhs of people!' Rama wanted to go to the sea straightaway.

'Child, the sea won't run away. It will stay there till the evening. You cannot set foot on the beach as the sun is burning hot. Let it cool down a bit. You can go later. You must be tired. Spread a mat and lie down,' said his grandmother. Rama laughed. 'Ajji, it is true that the ground is hot. On my way, even the grassy field I walked on was burning my feet. The sand on the riverside was very hot.'

'Even then you want to go to the sea!'

'Ajji, what do you know? Someone said that our Kodi sea is going to Kundapura for the May holidays. I must see it before it leaves. That's why I was in a hurry.'

Bachchi sat at the edge of the yard with her chin on her hand, listening innocently to his words. Her assessment was that he hadn't stopped being a child.

'That's right, Bachchi. It is almost time that my beard grew white. The children of today have no sense whatsoever,' said Rama.

Among such sweet words and pleasantry the job of making happala had been neglected. Nagaveni remembered, and sat down to carry on with it. Rama offered to make some.

'Do they teach you that as well in Madras?' she asked.

'What do you know about Madras happala?' he said. 'They make it as thin as paper. It melts in your mouth. It is not like the cow-dung cakes that people of Kodi make.'

'Your Madras is great,' said his mother.

Meanwhile, the son tried to make happala and the dough got stuck to the rolling pin and the board. 'Amma, how is this happala?' he asked. 'College happala must be just like this,' his mother said in reply.

'Ajji, the people who go to Madras and come back don't even know how to make happala,' Bachchi said, making fun of Rama.

'Bachchi, they make it with dosé mix, not with this.'

'Is that true, Odathi?' Bachchi asked, revealing her simple mind.

The mother made her son eat something before evening fell. 'Ajji, please cook. I want to go to the sea with Amma. I used to go to the sea in Madras everyday with the children. What lovely children they are, Amma!' he said, praising them, and stepped out with his mother. As he left, he asked Bachchi if she wasn't coming to the sea to take some air.

'Odeya, when we don't have anything to eat, air is what we take in,' Bachchi said laughingly. Rama smiled but was

worried. 'Amma, how is Bachchi's family?' he asked as they walked along.

'She just said it, didn't she? That's how it is.'

'Poor souls!' Rama said.

Going up the beach, he saw the sea and lost himself. He opened his mouth to the wind blowing against him and shouted.

'Are you silly? You say you go to the sea in Madras everyday.'

'What if I go everyday, Amma? Can it match our sea here? If I should shout there as I do here, they will take me to the mental hospital. In the evening, so many people gather there on the sandy beach that you cannot see the sand beneath them. How can this peace be obtained there?'

'Are you saying that our sea is more beautiful than the one over there?'

'What is ours is always beautiful.'

'You have learnt to make amusing talk after going to Madras.'

'Chikkamma too says the same thing. She says that I talk too much. Is it true, Amma?'

'No, child. You are indeed talking more than you used to before. Your tongue was reined in when you were in Mangalore. Now, there seems to be no such check.'

'Yes, Amma. My mind seems to have expanded this year. How are you at home, Amma?'

'Apart from thinking about you, everything is fine. Chikkappa comes once in a while to see how we are.'

'Are you able to spend your time well ? Do you play the violin?'

'I do. Not always, though. When I think of you, I play a lot. Your Bachchi comes to listen to me. "Amma, what are you doing making that noise?" she says. She listens and listens and then asks what I gain by playing on the violin. I tell her

that I play to while away time. Apart from that, I play with Thungé. That calf even comes into the kitchen and rubs itself against me when I am eating! How much love these dumb creatures have!'

'Human beings do not have so much love in them.'

'You are right.'

Their conversation brought them right up to the sea. They sat on the shore and talked till their mouths ran dry. They were not aware that evening had fallen. Nor were they aware of the crows travelling overhead. Though the strong smell of fish dried in the sun wafted in from the distant beach, they weren't aware of it.

They stood up to go back since it was getting dark. It was summer and there was no moonlight. So they decided to walk, watching the path for fear of snakes which might be lying outside at night in the summer wind. From the Kedigé thicket, the strong wind carried with it the smell of happala.

'Poisonous ringed snakes might be in there. Isn't that so, Amma?'

'Oh, they are everywhere.'

Rama came to the tank by the house. His mother washed her feet and went in. Rama went into the water up to his neck and spent a long time, gargling with the water in his mouth.

His mother came and asked, 'Rama, did you never have a bath in Madras at all?' It was only then that he got out. He sat for his meal and finished it quickly. His grandmother asked him how the seasoned cashewnuts were. 'What? Cashewnuts? Who ate them?' he asked, and both his mother and grandmother laughed. 'In the excitement of your talking, you don't even remember what you have eaten. How silly! I asked Bachchi, had cashewnuts brought in, seasoned and served them and all that you do is to fill your mouth like the demon Bakasura and remember nothing.'

Rama laughed. 'Oh, had I already eaten the nuts? Let it be. Make it again tomorrow and before serving, remind me

that it is cashewnuts. Then I will eat it and tell you what it is like!'

That night, mother and son ate together and sat talking again. Grandmother was fed up with all that talking.

'If you finish talking about everything today itself, what will you have left for tomorrow? Nagaveni, are you out of your mind? Shouldn't the child rest after coming all that way from Madras?' she scolded them.

Both of them lay down. From then on, they talked in whispers so that the grandmother wouldn't hear. 'Are you happy in Krishnaveni's house?' his mother asked him. 'There is a world of difference between Chikkamma and Lalitatté,' he replied.

They were tired after so much talking, and stopped. But Rama could not sleep although an hour passed.

'Amma,' he said.

'Hmmm.'

'Couldn't you sleep?'

'No, I don't think I can tonight.'

'Come then, let's go to the beach. There's a cool wind blowing.'

'No, Rama, Amma may get angry.'

'What does it matter to Ajji? She is snoring. Moreover, nothing can be heard above the din of palm fronds. Come, let's go. I want to listen to you playing the violin.'

The mother responded positively to her son's whim. They got up like thieves and went up to the beach behind the house. The Ashtami moon emerged and his tender light fell in a line across the sea and glittered like the edge of a sword. Nagaveni tuned the violin and her mind was wandering all over. It was like a calf prancing around aimlessly all over the yard.

'So much time has passed this year. Shouldn't you have learnt to tune your violin at least?' asked Rama teasingly and

snatched it from her hands. He tightened the strings and ran the bow over them. Just the drawing of the bow twice over the strings made the ground seem to shake, from south Kodi to the north. Like the eyes of a fox smelling a crab and wondering whether to eat it or not, Nagaveni's eyes glittered as she watched her son.

Rama tuned the instrument to the sound of the sea. Like the breeze bringing in rain, Rama made the eddy of the raga spring, lifted it up and down like a breaker and spread it and played around with it. Though the day dawned, Rama's hands didn't rest.

Bachchi, who got up from her mat early in the morning to pound paddy, heard the violin playing. She followed the sound, thinking how silly Nagaveni was, and arrived right there. Then she saw them both sitting on the beach. Nagaveni seemed to have turned into stone where she sat. Rama was crazy. The lawlessness of the wind provoked his inner self. 'Amma,' Bachchi asked, 'Does your child also have the craze for playing like you do?'

Perhaps his delineation of the raga was over, or his contemplation. Both mother and son opened their eyes.

'Why did you come here, Bachchi?' Rama asked.

'Can one sleep with this type of harassment?' Bachchi laughed as she spoke. 'It is not a word or song. It is just noise. Doesn't Ayya feel like sleeping at all?'

Nagaveni remembered her mother. 'Let's go, child,' she said, and wondered how Rama had become such an expert in playing the violin. 'You have learnt enough after going to Madras. Did you ever listen to my playing in Mangalore?'

'I used to listen stealthily. Even now I stealthily play the violin. Somehow, I am afraid of playing before people. This good-for-nothing Bachchi is the only one who stole my secret.'

'Is Ayya angry with me for what I said?'

'No, Bachchi. I just said it for fun.'

They both went home. Ajji was still sleeping. Both of them slept and by the time they woke up later, the hot sun was roasting them even as they lay on their mats.

~25~

One never feels the passage of time when one is happy. Rama was not aware of his holidays passing by. The month of June arrived and the raindrops heralding the season ended the dreams of mother and son. Rama had to reach Madras within a week. His college might open a few days later, but he had houses where he taught, and he couldn't afford to lose them. That was why he wanted to leave as soon as possible. In between, another stroke of good fortune befell him. After ages, Subbi heard the news of her brother's son arriving home and she came over to Kodi. It must have been at least six years since she last saw her sister-in-law and her son. She had heard a long time ago that the Kodi house had been closed. Somebody had told her the tale of its return to farming. But Subbi's family was large and there was no dearth of ups and downs in the family. In the midst of looking after eight children and household chores, she had no moments of leisure. But, in between, she would think of her mother's home. Wouldn't she wish to know who was living there?

She had come for her mother's obsequies. They were performed in Orata's house and she was not comfortable staying there. She had returned the same day and Lachcha hadn't even come near her when she was there. Even now, she was a little hesitant about how her brother's wife would react towards her after having been extremely hurt by his wickedness. Even if no one talked to her, she could at least see her father's house. If Rama had grown up, she could at least see someone belonging to her family doing well. That was her wish when she came to Kodi. She didn't have the courage to bring any of her children with her. There might be nobody there and the house could be empty. Rama might not have come at all. And so, she came alone to the river just as Rama was emerging from it. Just to satisfy her curiosity, she asked the person standing in front of her who was living in Aithala's house.

'Why? My mother,' said Rama.

'Are you Rama? How big you have grown, my child! Where are you going? I came just to see you,' she said, standing in the middle of the water.

Rama couldn't comprehend who she was, or anything else. How could he remember his childhood now? But he didn't want to be rude to someone who had spoken to him kindly. 'Amma, I am leaving for Madras now to go to my aunt's house. I must catch the afternoon bus for Mangalore. May I ask who you are?'

'Has my coming here been futile? Am I not your aunt, Rama? Can't you recognise your Mandarthi Atté?'

A smile flashed across Rama's face. 'Who? Subbatté? Even though I forgot, you didn't.'

He cancelled his journey to Madras and went back home with her.

'Atté, when did I see you last?'

'You were just this high, then. You have grown tall now. If my mother were alive, I would have come to see you. Your father abandoned us and I stopped coming. Who remained here, for me? How long has it been since your mother came here?'

Rama told her everything as they walked along. Nagaveni was surprised to see Rama standing in the yard. 'What did you forget?' she asked. He laughed and said, 'My aunt.'

That night, he listened to Subbatté's stories about the house in days gone by. He enjoyed listening to her narration about his father's childhood and his grandfather. Subbatté had not forgotten to bring him jackfruit happala. Right in front of her, he ate them raw after tearing them to pieces. 'Atté, if you had come a little later, this Rama would not have had the fortune of meeting you,' he said.

Subbatté insisted on Rama's coming to Mandarthi. Rama's heart was full. Though he had no time, he was courteous and grateful. The next day, he went back with her, met her children

and returned after promising that he would definitely come to her house if he came home during the holidays. From there, he left for Madras in a hurry.

During the train journey, he saw Subbatté before his eyes all the time. And, right behind her, conjectures about his father Lachchanna. Where could he be now? Once, he had heard that his father was in Vijayanagara. He felt that he should go there and see him someday.

As his thoughts rolled by, so did the wheels of the train, noisily. Within two days, he was playing with Ananda. On the third day itself, he started tuition.

* * *

During the second year of Inter, the lessons became more demanding. There was the heat of selection, in December. Rama's eyes were swollen with constant reading. Anyhow, it was decided that he should sit for the examination. How could he spend the following three months? He wrote home. 'Amma, I cannot ask anyone for money. It is now difficult to simultaneously carry on both teaching and learning. I must stop teaching for these months. If I do so, where can I get spending money?' Madhava knew of his predicament. He called Rama and said, 'Stop tuition now, until March. I shall give you the money you need. If you don't like that, you can pay me back after you start working.'

Rama could find no other way out. But he didn't feel it was right to take a loan from his uncle. When he was thinking about what he should do, a money order for fifty rupees arrived from his mother. Rama hadn't thought it possible for his mother to have that much money. She might have asked her uncle. He could just as well have done that, instead of her. The next day, a letter from her arrived. 'By some good fortune or the other, when we were breaking the wall to put in a window, we discovered a small bag containing a hundred rupees. That was your grandfather's doing. Whatever it may be, it was found in time. Spend it carefully. Write if you need more.' Rama couldn't believe anyone. He had heard about his

grandfather and knew about the commotion caused in the house when his father had stolen money from where his grandfather had hidden it. But that he could get money from his grandfather's hoard was something beyond his wildest conjecture.

Krisnaveni read that letter. 'Anyway, your load is lightened. You can study peacefully now,' she said.

Krishnaveni was doubtful whether such a thing was possible. If it was true, Rama would be a rich man if the house was demolished, she thought.

The truth was that the money Rama had given Krishnaveni had gone to Kodi and come right back. Nagaveni had remembered what Bachchi used to say and used it as an explanation for the money. She thought she wouldn't tell the truth till his B.A. was over.

Rama studied hard and completed Inter. He decided to get back to tuition. It wasn't possible because the people who had engaged him earlier were not happy that he had stopped teaching with the excuse that he had exams. Only one family had not appointed someone else. They called Rama back and gave him money for a fortnight's tuition.

A letter arrived from Kodi asking him to come home. Didn't he want to go? Of course, he did. But should money be wasted? Looking ahead, there was even more difficulty to be faced for his B.A., and more money needed. So he thought he would use the holidays to work. Along with other thoughts, the amusing idea of using any money he might have to find out about his father – what sort of a man he was, and his whereabouts – also cropped up in his mind. Did it matter anyway? Meanwhile, Madhava, who hadn't gone home for a long time, wanted to go there with his wife and children. 'I will look after the house, you go,' said Rama. 'There is no need for that. You too come along. It doesn't cost that much to take one more person,' said Madhava. But Rama decided that he would not go.

Krishnaveni went to Mangalore. Madhava's house was in Udupi. She went there with the children. From there, longing

to see her mother and sister, she went to Kodi. The mother was overjoyed to see her daughter. So was Nagaveni who wished that Rama too had come. Krishnaveni praised Rama before the elders and said he was like a god. She mentioned Rama in everything she said, and so his mother felt that all the pain she had suffered in her youth and the hardship she was facing even now was well worth it.

The younger sister asked, 'Akka, what happened to your violin-playing?' Nagaveni played to while away the time. 'How beautifully you play, Akka! Our Jaya is twelve years old. If there was someone to teach, she could have learned how to play. You don't find anyone there. Who will teach her for less than ten or twelve rupees? If so much is paid for music alone, what about school, study, food, rent and milk? We waited for five years to come here with the family.'

'Why? Isn't Rama there? He plays the violin ten times better than I can.' She then talked about what had happened when he came home last. Krishnaveni was wonderstruck. 'Rascal! He hasn't brought a violin home until now. Nor has he opened his mouth to sing. Maybe he is learning somewhere, saying he is going for tuition.' The children came to know of his violin-playing from their mother. 'Abba! What a cheat! Whenever we asked him if he knew how to sing, he would keep saying no,' they said.

Rama spent the holidays in May, staying back in the heat of Madras. Longing to earn money, he went around to give lessons. This time, it was music that he taught, not parrot-learning. Since Madhava had told him when they were coming back, he went to the Central Station and waited for the Mangalore train. As soon as the children saw him, they said, 'Mava, you cheat! Violin!' Rama couldn't understand a thing, but his secret was out on the way home.

Ananda made a big fuss saying that he wouldn't eat until Rama played. To appease the child, he had to get the violin he had hung up in someone's house and play with the door closed. Krishnaveni enjoyed the music. 'Rama, when did you find the time? You must teach only Jaya, not anyone else,

what you know,' she said. Rama answered in fun that what he paid for food would cancel out his fee for teaching music. A burden was lifted from his head.

Jayamma's music lessons went on. When Rama went to give money for meals, Krisnaveni refused to take it and reminded him of what he had said. Rama got angry. 'No, you must. I have some income now.' Krisnaveni asked him whether she was more distantly related to him than his mother. Then Rama had nothing else to say and kept quiet. But twelve rupees continued to be sent by Krishnaveni to his mother.

His studies went on and it was difficult for Rama to make ends meet. He didn't want to borrow money from anyone else. He knew that money would not drop down from holes in the wall whenever it was needed. He didn't lack anything as far as food was concerned. It was difficult to pay the fees and buy books. Even so, he was going to his friends to study and giving music lessons to cover his fees.

During the second year, his mother was fed up waiting for him to come home during May for his holidays. Though she wondered if he was turning out to be like his father, she didn't feel like mentioning it in her letters. She accepted his reasons and said he could come home after finishing his B.A.

* * *

That was the fourth year in Madras for Rama. The Michaelmas holidays had arrived and Rama was obsessed with his studies. He often went to the houses of his friends and studied there. He borrowed books he didn't have and read them. During the holidays, he went to the house of his close friend, Rajamani Aiyar. Rajamani was reading Sunderland's *India in Bondage* which had been published recently. Looking at the thickness of the book, Rama asked what it was about. 'I have to return it by tomorrow morning. So I am in a hurry,' Rajamani said. He sat up the whole night and read it. Rama was curious about the book since it had made his friend abandon even his studies. He picked it up; it was a heavy book written by a foreigner.

'Yes, I will look at it. There's no hurry. What will happen if I too keep it for another day?' he said, tucking the book into his side bag. Rajamani was taken aback. 'Rama, don't do that. It's a proscribed book. The government will seize it wherever it is seen. Our B.A. and M.A may have to be done in Ellore or Kadaloore prison.'

Rama wouldn't have been so curious if he had just been told not to read it. He was determined to read it because it was proscribed. He wanted to finish it then and there and went on reading till the lights were switched off at night. Finally, he gave it back to Rajamani and told him to return it to the owner.

'How is the book?'

'What can I say? When a foreigner can weep so much for our being shackled, why don't we even feel we are chained? Like tiger cubs brought up in cages, should we assume this is our home?'

From that day. along with his studies, India too stayed in his head. He ventured into political discussions with his voluble friends. He read *The Hindu* from A to Z. Moreover, at the time, the National Movement was hotting up and simmering all over the country. He was a young boy during the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921. He had forgotten long ago how he had joined other boys and shouted 'Gandhiji *Ki Jai*.' It was now that the upsurge of patriotism merged with the heat of his youth . He was a young adult and he had been sitting thinking only about his own condition, totally blind to the state of the nation. It was the time when, everyday, a large crowd would gather in the Thiruvallikkeni beach in Madras and shout *'Inquilab Zindabad'* until their throats ran dry. He too started going there, stirred by patriotism. Hearing speeches by patriots like Sathyamurthy and Prakasham, he was filled with rage.

Gandhi's march to Dandi started at that time. Sabarmathi became the Delhi of India, Dandi the Panipat. Hundreds, thousands and lakhs of people stepped into a new war led by Gandhi. Truth, non-violence and the Charaka became the

chants of devotion. They brought sea water and began making salt. Rajamani argued that Independence for the country would be achieved within six days of the Salt Sathyagraha. Rama was won over by the emotionally charged argument that, though it wouldn't arrive so soon, Independence would drop from heaven if the whole nation sharpened its weapons of struggle on this whetstone of salt.

Everyday, he would listen to lectures in the college. From there he went straight to the beach. He wouldn't be a coward like Rajamani, joining public meetings only when it was dark. 'What is this, Rajamani? Should those that talk of freedom come stealthily to hear a speech? Why can't we, the children of this country, be able to express ourselves like Sunderland?' he said. Rajamani smiled. 'Ramu, you are independent. You can boss over your mother. But my examination fees have to come from my father. I have a wife and children at home. They must not be cheated of food.'

The next day, the college management gave the students a warning. 'Political noise comes only after your student life is over. Not here. It is only after you stand on your own feet, not when your elders are paying for your education.' There was even a threat that those who appeared in beach meetings would have to give up thoughts of being selected. From that day, Rajamani gave up buying *The Hindu.*

But Rama, who had been inspired by his friend, was not cowed down by what was said. The words of his lecturers made him angrier. 'What does it matter what we do outside college? Have we sold our souls to them?' he asked himself. Three days later, his favourite professor called him. 'I am surprised at an intelligent student like you falling for this political illusion. Can Independence ever be won by making salt? So many states who are making their own salt are still in bondage. Don't ruin your youth and opportunities like a mad person. Later on, when you are an adult, do whatever your experience tells you. Now, it is just anger on your part.'

Rama respected his teacher as well, and he was not brave enough to say no to what he said. Neither did he want

to say yes. He just said that he would think about it, and came home. He was selected for B.A. in due time and Rajamani had been selected too. He decided he would never turn towards politics again.

But circumstances changed when the Christmas holidays came. Sathyagraha became a problem of facing lathi charge instead of a happy journey to the prison. Rama, who went to see the Salt Sathygraha, ran back home in fear. He couldn't sleep at night. 'Have I become such a coward? Did I get scared by the harassment by the police, when women and children moved on ahead in the fight for freedom? What is the difference between Rajamani and myself?' Having allowed the spirit of revenge against the government to simmer within his mind into a layer of cream, he decided the next day that he would join the Sathyagraha, no matter what. He went to the place where salt was being prepared, after the violence had subsided.

A patriot said that those who hadn't given their names earlier could not come to participate in the Sathyagraha. Again, a whole day was spent in gaining entry. The next day, when he should have been in college in the company of books, he was keeping company with salt. Who knew what happened then? He didn't either. He shouted, *'Inquilab Zindabad,'* with hundreds of other people. He shouted, 'Mahatma Gandhi *Ki Jai.*'

When he regained consciousness, he was lying in a hospital with a bandaged head.

Seeing that Rama had not come back home for two or three days on end, Krishnaveni, Madhava and the children were greatly worried. In those days, even children were full of the enthusiasm of Sathyagraha. Whenever they saw a policeman's cap, they would say, 'Gandhiji *Ki Jai.*' Madhava's children did not fall behind in such matters. Listening to them talking only of Sathyagraha, Krisnaveni wondered whether Rama had also joined in. 'Rama? He will never go near it. He has never so far talked of such things at all,' Madhava said.

When he went to Rama's table, thinking about him, there lay a letter from Rama to Madhava. 'Please forgive the mistake I am making without telling you. My mind is being drawn towards my country. I cannot sit watching the bondage of my motherland and just carry on with my B.A. I am leaving today to join the Sathyagraha. Please don't worry about me at all.' He had left the letter there. The whole night, Madhava's mind was in a turmoil.

'The boy acted like a fool! Sathyagraha is only for people who have enough to eat. Is it for those who do not have it?' he muttered in his sleep. He took leave from office and started looking for Rama in hospitals, wondering where he might be lying. After Sathyagraha grew stronger, there was no straight path to prison except through hospitals.

But he was scared to look at the list of the injured in the hospitals. He was hesitant to let it be known that he was a relation of a Sathyagrahi. There was a fear in him that he might also get into trouble. Was wonder it any that Madhava felt apprehensive, when it was being said that the very walls, lanterns and pillars were doing the job of the C.I.D .? Nevertheless, he looked here and there and saw a crowd of people lying in a row and being nursed. He did reach Rama after a long search and enquiry. Rama sat up slowly. His body was hot because of the beating he had taken. His mind was boiling in rage at the government 'Rama, you came away without telling us!' said Madhava.

'Would you have said yes if I had told you?'

'No. Are we heartless to put you into the danger of losing your life?'

'. . . . .'

'Have you ever thought of what your mother will feel when she gets this news?'

Rama gave no reply. Maybe, he had not thought of his mother's state of mind when he was in a state of rage. Even if he had, it might not have been strong enough to lessen his

patriotic zest. Now, there was leisure. It was something that could be possibly thought of in moments of pain. Even then, he didn't speak.

'I will see.'

'You may even be pardoned if you ask for it. Why don't you finish your studies? Make the examination worthwhile. In these couple of months, freedom will not be held back because of you alone.'

'You don't know about the injustice to the nation, the injustice meted out everyday to people like me. Man doesn't live only to earn a livelihood.'

Madhava realised that there was no use talking to him. But he thought that after a few days, when the heat had subsided, Rama would seek the right path like he himself had. He went back a few days later to meet Rama. Then he discovered that he had already been sent to prison. The prison was overcrowded, and so they had sentenced him to six months rigorous imprisonment at Vellore.

Krishnaveni was shocked. What could she write to her sister who believed that her son was studying for the examination ? What could she say if Nagaveni asked how they had let him go even while he was staying with them? Would it be right not let her know now at least? She thought about it and wrote a letter to her sister about what had happened to Rama.

Nagaveni needed no other thunderbolt that day, after she read the letter. She knew stories of patriotism and she knew Gandhi's name. Why, even the fishermen of Kodi had started making salt without fear of policemen! The rest had gone for Sathyagraha as a show, but for the fishermen, it was their livelihood at stake. As one who had considered all these stories strange, and worthy of derision, she was saddened by the imprisonment of her son. Moreover, Rama had been injured and was in pain. He had spoilt his studies, destroyed the path for a bright future and gone off to prison. If, in future, he wandered away from her, against whom could she launch a

Sathyagraha? She was in agony. 'I am not destined to get happiness from anyone. I must have sinned and that's why I have this sorrow. Now, how can Rama give me any happiness?' she asked herself. It was an agonising question to ask, but she had no other alternative.

Meanwhile, Rama, the patriot, simmered even more with his national pride. The prison in Vellore was then like a Khadi fair, with the same kind of discipline and din. If freedom could be achieved by shouting, it should have fallen into their hands ten times over, considering the number of times they shouted '*Inquilab Zindabad*' and 'Gandhiji *Ki Jai*.' People from many towns had gathered there. If the jails got filled like that, it was believed that Britain would be destroyed within a year. Rama, in his exaggerated emotional state, had faith in the decision of the majority.

The prison was bursting at the seams with its inmates. The food they got was no better than what the poorest labourer received. This made the prisoners angrier and there was a strike for better food. The officials relented and there was better food when one of the Sathyagrahis was put in charge of cooking it.

A young Communist among them who believed that one could defeat the whole world by strikes, started spreading the teachings of Karl Marx, Lenin and Trotsky. Rama had suffered in poverty and so he thought that those ideas made better sense than Gandhi's. But what could he do? He had to put his trust in the useless principles of Truth and Non-violence! Some had said that they should stick to them till freedom was achieved and that there could be egalitarianism and Communism after that!

For the young, pride and frenzy are the tools of logic, and shouting is discernment. In such an atmosphere, how could Rama's mind acquire a balance among the various political thoughts?

All of a sudden, the prison gates were thrown open. The very people who were fed up catching the Sathyagrahis opened the gates. 'You may go where you want,' they said.

That was the result of an agreement between Gandhi and Irwin.

Rama found himself on the streets of Vellore. He had no other clothes to wear and there were no smooth arrangements to send people back to the places where they were brought from. Eventually, along with a few new friends, and carrying a ticket declaring that he was a Sathyagrahi, he came to Katpadi from Vellore. Where should he go from there? To Madras or Mangalore? Both would be journeys without tickets. He knew he couldn't take the examination. So what was the point in going to Madras? He had longed for his mother when he was in prison. He was scared as well about what she might say. It had been three years since he had seen her. How could he stay away from her even now? He made his decision and chose the road to Mangalore.

There was a war of words even on the train. The heroes who had been released maintained that freedom would be achieved by turning the wheel of the Charaka. Gandhi, according to them, was an Anjaneya who occupied a place higher than Lankeshwara and conducted his discussion. It was as if Britain, the kingdom of Lankeshwara, was in flames. The signs of victory were already to be seen in the world their emotions had created. Rama was not enthusiastic about such comparisons. One does not know whether Anjaneya indeed met Ravana or not. The indisputable fact, however, was that Rama had to face his mother shortly.

Not wishing to visit Lalité's house, he went into a hostel when he reached Mangalore. Though he was not keen on it, the patriot who had come from Madras had to speak, at the hostel, on recent happenings. He filled his speech with ideals and passion.'The service of the poor is our aim. The Independence of India is our aim,' he said. He even got his reward in the form of 'Rama Aithala *Ki Jai*' being shouted by the ones who listened to him. It went to the young head. He felt proud that he had become a big man so easily. And so, he spent the day giving two more lectures there.

The next day, Sadashiva heard of his nephew's arrival and came to see him. 'Rama, shouldn't you come to our house

at all?' he asked, and took him along. He knew everything about Rama . Everyone at home, including Lalité, looked after him well. She asked him whether he was going home from there or somewhere else. Her question reminded Rama of his mother once again, and so he proceeded home from there.

On reaching Mabukala, he got off the bus. He felt a little shy to go to his grandfather's house which was nearby, and so went straight home. His steps slowed down when the village came into view. When he reached the river, his legs felt as if they had been chained. He crossed the river and remembered the strange clothes he had on. He stuffed his cap into his pocket and, like a traveller searching for something he had lost, he walked over the fields and ridges towards his home. Thin drops of rain fell from above. In a nearby field, Bachchi and her children were pulling out weeds. She lifted her head at once on seeing Rama wearing white clothes and walking in the rain. 'Who is it? Sannodeya?' she asked in surprise. 'Yes,' said Rama.

'Should you stay away from your mother for two years? Should you do the same thing as your father did?' she asked, revealing the sorrow in her heart.

Bachchi's words pierced Rama like an arrow, What his mother had said when he left for Madras, what he had done now and the fruits of his learning — he remembered everything. Unable to find an answer, he asked if his mother was at home.

'Yes. your grandmother is not very well. Nothing serious. But she has aged.'

Rama didn't drag his feet any longer. They went homewards with alacrity. Rama crossed the yard and went straight into the verandah. There, his grandmother was leaning against a pillar, her legs swollen with fluid.

'Rama, you have come. Nagu, your son is here. Didn't I say he would come back?' Nagaveni came from the kitchen, rubbing her eyes which were watering profusely because she had been blowing on the wet firewood to make it burn. `What

did you say?' she asked as she came out. Rama stood before her. What can one say about that moment?

'Rama, you are here, my child. I have done nothing but think about you. How could you do this, my child,' said the mother. There were tears in Rama' eyes. 'My child, how could you have left me – who else did you think I have?' she said.

Rama sobbed his heart out. How many years had gone by since he had cried like that! At the moment, he realised what a great offender he was. His mother came forward. 'Are you hurt by what I said? Don't cry. Have you eaten?' she asked. 'No,' came the reply. He didn't say anything more.

Nagaveni went back to get the fire going. She used the same fire with which she had made a decoction for her mother, to make some rice for Rama. Ajji called Rama. 'It looks as if my final day is approaching.'

'Why do you say that? I shall go and get medicine. Won't you get some in Udupi hospital? You will get better soon.'

Rama went to take a dip in the tank as his grandmother suggested. He came home in the same wet clothes. 'Rama, why are you wearing wet clothes? Didn't you bring other clothes?'

'I left them all behind in Madras,' he said. His mother brought some clothes that he hadn't taken with him when he left home. Wearing them, he had his meal.

Nagaveni did not talk to him much. 'What can I say to him? What is the point in hurting him for a mistake he made due to his bad luck? Shouldn't one be consoled by the fact that he remembered his mother and came back?' she thought.

Mother and son talked in a soft voice for a very long time that night. 'This is what happened. I will finish my B.A. next year and find a job. I forgot you all for a moment.' His mother listened to the story of the Sathyagraha. He described everything from lathi charges to the festive meals he had in jail She felt thrilled and didn't think that what her son did was

shameful. 'This was not meant for poor people. What you did was right. But it is not for people who don't know where their next meal is coming from.' That was the conclusion she arrived at. 'Mava and Chikkamma said the same thing. But I didn't listen to them,' Rama said.

The next day, Rama had to shoulder responsibility. He went straight to Narayanappa and asked him what he could do about his grandmother's illness. When he left, Nagaveni had placed a rupee in his hand saying it was from a crack in the wall, so, there was no need to ask for money. Now, it was his grandfather's turn to chastise him. 'How quickly you children forget those who brought you up and swallowed tears for your sake!' Rama had to cry there once again and his grandfather had to console him.

From there, he went to Udupi by bus. He bought some medicine for his grandmother from a doctor. Since only four annas were left over from the rupee, he deviated from the bus road and started back along the seaside. On the way, he met a middle-aged man. He took the road to Thonsé-Kodi road, chatting with him and describing the Sathyagraha in other places. The companion said, 'But for the accounting job in the village and having to earn a living, I too would be making salt.' When it was time for him to turn homeward and say goodbye, he said, `We have talked for so long but I never asked you where you live!'

'In Kodi.'

'Kodi! In Kodi?'

'Yes, I am Rama Aithala's grandson.'

The Shanubhog looked at Rama from top to toe. He laughed suddenly.

'You idiot! Who do you think I am? Do you remember your grandmother? She was my sister.... Are you our Sathyabhama's grandson?' So saying, Madappayya's son Janardanayya dragged him off to Padumunnooru. He wouldn't listen to Rama even after being told of his grandmother's sickness. Finally, Rama said he would come if Janardanayya came to their house as well.

On the way home, Janardanayya said that after Nagaveni and Lachcha had left after their wedding, none of them had met his family because of Lachcha's wickedness. What hospitality was shown at his place! The Shanubhog told his wife with great joy that Rama was his grandson. Rama was indeed happy and was well looked after in his grandfather's place. But his mind was restless. There was his grandmother in pain at home. Should he stay on here for a festive meal? 'I had been to your house when your father was there. After that, I never set foot there. What did I have to do in that place? We heard that your father was performing his mother's obsequies in someone else's place and so we didn't attend it either. Let me visit Kodi because of you,' he said as he left, holding Rama's hand.

Something came in the way of his desire to walk from Thonsé onwards. The Shanubhog called a boatman. 'Bella, take the boat to Kodi.' Despite their saying no, two tender coconuts came down and coconut water was served following the meal. Grandfather got off on the banks at Kodi, talking all the while to Rama.

Nagaveni watched them coming from the verandah with her hand on her forehead. Rama asked her, 'Can you say who this is?' Then, Nagaveni remembered the journey to Padumunnooru in her youth. 'Is he not from Padumunnooru?' she asked.

'What did you say?'

'He is from your grandfather's family.'

The old woman was given medicine, and the doses and diet were explained. She was informed about the doctor's opinion that it was nothing serious. 'If you need medicine, our servant Ugrani can be sent across once in two days,' said Janardanayya.

After dinner that night, he held a story-telling session beginning from Rama Aithala's wedding to the time Lachcha left home.

~26~

Rama lived in the wilderness for a year. He couldn't continue with his B.A. It was the month of August and he could join college only the following year. He had to start working again. All the hard work done earlier, and his selection, were futile. He decided to spend the time at home. On one hand, he had to take care of his grandmother. On the other, there was his decision not to stay away from his mother unless he had work. In between, he picked up the violin which had been put aside. Feeling that it wasn't enough, he started going to Hangarakatté everyday. Somebody there got *The Hindu.* He would wait till the rich man who got it finished reading the paper and then graze on the news in a hurry.

He read the newspapers everyday and would discuss the ideational basis of the 'Sickle and Hammer' with people whom he met. The subjects covered in these discussions included the poverty of people, the Harijan question, problems of Charaka-spinning, and the uplift of the country. The members of his discussion group were a middle-aged school teacher and some young men who had finished half their education. Everyday, they carried on with their discussion till their heads got heated up. Someone eventually said, 'Gandhi hasn't told us to give lectures. He has asked us to prohibit drinking, spin, and maintain the cleanliness of the village. But no one has gone ahead and done anything. The movement has lost its grip because all that was done was shouting "Gandhi *Ki Jai.*"' Rama looked around, embarrassed. It was as if the words had been intended to prick him. He couldn't disagree with the truth in those words. 'What you say is right,' he said, 'We talk more and act less. I have free time for the next ten months. You tell me what needs to be done.'

'What you can do is to open a Congress office and then a Charaka association, hold a takli meeting, and sell Khadi.'

So, then and there, a Charaka association was started. A board was hung upstairs in an empty warehouse. Four dozen

taklis for spinning were brought from Udupi and distributed among people.

One evening, Bachchi saw Rama walking along the edge of the field, spinning with a takli. 'Ayya,' she laughed, 'Are you making a net as well?' Rama had not clearly heard what she said and so asked, 'What did you say?' 'This job of twisting the thread is for the children of our Mogera to make a net with jute fibre.' Rama said, 'You are a fool! How can you understand what I tell you?'

Wasn't the spindle new? Even at night it turned and turned in the flickering light of the lantern. 'What is this, Rama?' his mother asked. 'This is for making yarn. From now on, I guarantee that I shall provide all the clothes we need.' His mother laughed. 'It is like feeding Ravana with a paisa worth of buttermilk! Is there such a dire need that we have to make yarn and cover ourselves with it?' Rama told her the principle underlying the takli. 'Gandhiji has said that freedom can be achieved only by this.' What Gandhi, what freedom? Your grandfather Rama Aithala kept on and on making sacred threads and died without gaining freedom from even his son. I had given you the wheel with which he spun yarn to whirl around and play with. Now you are spinning it to make yarn and bring salvation!' Rama, in turn, preached for an hour and a half. Eventually, he said, 'Amma, wouldn't I be able to while away time at least with this?' 'Don't you have your violin for that?' she countered.

Days passed by. Rama's enthusiasm for spinning continued. Within just ten days, the members of the association spun altogether forty tholas of yarn. They took it to Udupi and gave it for weaving. 'Takli is a success,' they said, floating in the air with joy. What next? The matter was discussed in the next meeting of the Congress committee. Service to Harijans, sale of Khadi, prohibition — they decided to carry on with those tasks. Naganna Master moved around the place proudly with Rama.

'But for the damned job of being a school teacher, I would have become a member of Congress,' the Master said.

'Why can't you become one now?'

'Oh, well! The Board President already has an eye on me. If he transfers me to Hebri or Madras, I may get a malarial tumour.'

'What else can you do?'

'I can help you in your prohibition work secretly.'

The next Friday, there was a shandy at Barakooru. On Monday, there was one in Kota. They decided to enrol at least five hundred members. Rama and his friend stood in the shandy and made glorious speeches. Even as they spoke, they kept spinning on the takli. After that, the membership list was brought out and they asked everyone to become a member of the Congress. People came forward eagerly to sign. Rama said that those who signed would pay just four annas a year as subscription.

'Four annas! For that, you can get a pair of dhotis,' said one man.

'I thought that the Congress would be giving us four annas,' said another.

'For four annas, you can get two measures of coconut oil or two bottles of kerosene.'

Rama came back home depressed after collecting the names of six members.

The week after, they took Khadi to sell at the shandy. The villagers found out how much it cost. 'We thought Gandhi cloth was cheap. This is something that will clean out the house,' they complained. Rama was upset. 'If you buy foreign clothes, every paisa will go outside the country and a time will come when your own people will starve. On the other hand, if you buy this, all the money will go to the poor people in your town,' he argued.

'Maybe. But do I have any property left by my father? Can I afford to give twelve annas for a rough dhoti when I can get one for two annas?'

'That's right. We will all become penniless destitutes after buying this,' said another.

However, a couple of friends bought some out of sympathy and a feeling of obligation. Naganna Master bought two dhotis that he could at least wear at home. Needless to say, it was bought on credit. The loan was cleared in instalments of one anna or half an anna over the rest of the year.

Within three months, attendance at Rama's Congress dried up. The takli disappeared, though Rama was determined that he wouldn't abandon it no matter who else did. He resigned from his post as Secretary and was worried about what he could do during the long stretch of time ahead. Then he decided he would involve himself with prohibition and other matters. He made up his mind to go from house to house whenever he was free and mobilise support for prohibition. The first house in the campaign was Bachchi's 'Ayya, why have you come?' asked Bachchi's husband Kaala. Rama talked in a serious tone. 'I want to tell you fishermen something. Kaala, you gather all of them in a place. Do you know how much money is going to the government from you on account of toddy and liquor?'

'Ayyo, if we get a good catch, we may even drink toddy worth fifty rupees!'

Rama explained to him the economics of the whole thing. 'You must all swear that you will not drink.' Kaala too thought that Rama was right. 'Say that a hundred times, Odeya,' Bachchi said. 'If you go about in this manner asking the fishermen to gather, they may not come. Next Monday, the people in Kodibalé are putting up a play in front of the Arama temple. You come there and give your lecture. Your words will then have been spoken on a right occasion. Let them all take a vow in front of the temple itself. It is not too much for the fishermen to make up their mind,' said Kaala and sent his master home.

The week after, three plays, promised to Arama , were performed in front of the temple by the troupes from Kodibalé, Padukerebalé and Manoorubalé. All three plays dealt with the theme of Dasha Avatara. There was a competition between

the plays from the Maranakatté and Mandarthi groups on the last day. Rama had no memory of having seen such performances. He was very eager to watch the plays performed outdoors. He realised that this was a good opportunity to see them. He got together with the Hangarakatté friends and discussed the matter with them. Rama became their leader and posters for propaganda were prepared. Sayings like 'Kill the Demon Drink,' 'Destroy Drinks' were made up. Like the practice of olden times, of saving expenses by writing proverbs on whitewashed walls of schools, the stage was decorated with them.

It was the turn of the Mandarthi group to perform on the first day. The famous comedian Venkappa of that team also happened to be working for Subbatté. So, he was the one to cheer the speech given by Rama Aithala's grandson. While Rama was enjoying the play, Venkappa appeared as Hanuman on the stage. 'Look, the people of the Yadava family are destroying themselves today by drinking toddy. Krishna, send someone to give them salvation,' he said, giving a humorous preface to Rama's speech. Then the three patriots spoke for an hour. The villagers were awestruck with their passion and the way they spoke. Rama lost himself when he stood up to speak. When his speech was over, the comedian garlanded him and the spectators applauded. In Kaliyuga, for the first time, the shout of 'Gandhiji *Ki Jai*' rose like a hurricane on the beach.

Bachchi's husband got up from where he was sitting. 'It is all very well for you to say "Jai" after listening to the speech,' he said, chewing betel nut and leaves. 'But, what Odeya is saying is that the fisher folk should give up drinking toddy and liquor. What do you say to that? I swear here that I will never touch it again,' he said. The leaders of Maribalé were enthused. 'Yes! Are we corpses? When Gandhi himself says it, are we so big that we do not heed his words?' they shouted. Over a hundred people swore that day to stay away from drink.

The next day, it was the turn of the Padukerebalé group. The day after, the home of drunkards, Manooru village, also

stood up and joined the others. On that day there was as much commotion while giving up drinking as there was about the play and the competition.

On their way back after the play, Kaala, Thowda, Gaali and Govinda, in order to fulfil their promise, threw stones at the toddy pots tied to Siddu Poojari's trees by the seashore. That evening, they went to the toddy shop, picked up all the toddy pots he had brought and emptied them in the salty water of the stream. Siddu Poojari was bewildered. He ran to the Brahmavara police station and lodged a complaint.

The next day, red-turbaned policemen wandered around in their village and the neighbouring ones. There was whispering and murmuring in the village wherever one looked. Hangarakatté Congress became vibrant with life and organised four meetings that day. There was no need even to mention that Nagappa Master never once went anywhere near anyone dressed in Khadi. Anyhow, Rama was proud, as if he had done something great and the Demon Drink had disappeared from the west coast.

The police visited their village many a time. They scolded a few whom they met. Siddu Poojari was not courageous enough to say who had caused the damage since he was afraid of what might happen in the days to come. Eventually, though he wasn't able to recover his losses, the liquor which had lost its clients found some. He honoured the turbaned men with it and kept quiet, exhausted.

It had been agreed that a Round Table Conference would be held abroad. Our young men decided that Gandhiji would squeeze freedom from the British and bring it back. Rama decided that once freedom was achieved, their goal would be the hammer and sickle. Anyway, on account of the Round Table Conference, the national movement was also rounded up. The movement which had begun as a great destructive force subsided. An odd one here and there spun the takli. The Prabhat Pheri songs were forgotten.

But Rama got hold of an event which came in handy. His proclamation that he was ever ready to protect the poor,

and a salt case which came up in Kodi, coincided. News reached the Hangarakatté Congress Committee that someone called Sanka had been prosecuted. The next day, they got the information that it wasn't Sanka but Puttu Mogera from Thonsé, who had indeed prepared salt but had not sold it. The police had manufactured a couple of witnesses and for some reason or another, they had filed a case against him. Rama became the young hero Abhimanyu. 'Amma, there's no way I can stay away from Thonsé,' he said, abandoning the leaf on which he had been served food and following the victim, Puttu Mogera. Puttu Mogera wept copiously saying that he had been thrashed by the police, and many things had happened like this and like that. Rama was all set to protect the orphan!

There was a secret meeting in the warehouse office in Hangarakatté. They decided upon all sorts of things. 'Let us write a letter to Gandhi,' they said, 'Let us give an application to the Collector.' Who knew what they did, but when Rama was thinking of leaving for Madras, the police arrived at Rama's house itself along with Puttu. Puttu pointed to Rama and said, 'Ayya, I have sold just one measure of salt to this man.' Rama was scared stiff. He had set out to free Puttu and now Puttu himself was saying that he had bought salt. Rama was amazed. The police threatened to file a case against him. 'I have seen a jail before. Your government is built on lies,' Rama said. And so, both subversion and tax evasion were plugged together in their charge. If the news hadn't reached Padumunnooru and the Shanubhog hadn't dampened the fire, it would have burnt strongly and Rama's studies would have come to an end. 'Rama, you don't know what our people are like. When you wanted to help him, he turned against you. You don't have enough experience. Helping others is not for Kaliyuga,' said the Shanubhog decisively.

For a whole week, Rama never showed himself in Hangarakatté. Instead, he told his mother that he would go to Madras, finish his B.A. and look to the future. The mother was happy that Rama was coming to his senses and said, 'Go to Subbi's house before you leave. I wonder how she is! She had on her own come here last year. This time, though it has

been nine months since you came, you haven't been there. Go and look her up.' Rama went to Mandarthi, stayed there for three days and made his aunt happy. When he came back home, there was trouble at home and trouble in the village.

The trouble at home was of a personal nature. His grandmother was bedridden again. Narayanappa came down and wondered whether his sister-in-law would survive. The trouble in the village was that a riot had taken place. The Maribalé fishermen of his village had got drunk, fought with one another, got injured and were taken into custody by the police. That was within six months of the triumphant victory that Rama had won in his fight with the Demon Drink. He was depressed when he thought about it. And he was in great pain when he thought of his household.

Within two days, a telegram was sent to Krishnaveni as well. Sadashiva and his brother rushed down from Mangalore. Everyone was eager to nurse the old lady back to health. Eventually, finding it difficult to go across the river to fetch medicine, they took her to Airodi. Rama too went and looked after her. He was the one to run up and down to Udupi and back to bring the medicine. Nagaveni was right in believing that there was no drug which could fight death. The old lady didn't recover.

After the obsequies were over, Rama talked to his mother. 'Amma, what will you do? I am leaving for Madras. Will you stay alone in Kodi? The money that Ajji was getting is not there now. How can we live on?' Though Narayanayya asked Nagaveni to stay on, she left for Kodi. Rama said, 'I will definitely come back after finishing my B.A. Then I will find a job and take you with me.' Krishnaveni asked her to go with her to Madras but Nagaveni refused. Eventually, only Rama went back to Madras with her.

In the hot sun of July, Rama became a visitor yet again to the beach at Thiruvellikkeni. The studies which he had once given up, began again. His text books had changed and he had to study hard. Moreover, it was tough earning some money and studying at the same time.

As soon as he came to Madras, he started looking for an opportunity to teach somewhere. It was true that he had found a few houses before. But this time, he couldn't find even one anywhere. The houses where he had taught had engaged other teachers. His only remaining student was the fourteen-year-old daughter of his aunt who had begun to learn music. Rama had taken part in the Sathyagraha and gone to prison and so, Madhava had been forced to ask someone else to teach her. Madhava said to Rama, 'There is no question of your teaching this year. There's no need. It will come in the way of your studies.' But Rama didn't want to be selfish. Moreover, he had to be under their obligation for his meals and he could not pay anything that year. How could he say that he could not teach? However, the children were happy that Rama had come back to their house.

'Ramanna, after you left home, the whole house was so dull!' Ananda would say.

'No one teaches music like you do. I want to listen to you playing over and over again. When others teach, I just wait for the lesson to be over,' his sister would say.

Krishni's daughter, now fourteen, had grown nicely and she always had a smile on her face. Rama was attracted by her innocent talk. How could he say he was unwilling to teach her? Along with that undertaking, he had to solve some of the problems she had with the fifth form Geometry and Algebra.

Rama's mother had given him fifty rupees when he came away. So it was not difficult for him to survive a couple of months. But later on, he couldn't earn enough to pay for his college expenses. He wondered quite a few times whether he should ask his grandfather at Airodi or his uncle, but kept quiet. It seemed as if there was no way he could finish his B.A. without others' help. Finally, he told Krishnaveni, 'Chikkamma, this year sees to be very difficult. Is there anything that I can do until the B.A. examinations are over?' His aunt told him that she could find a way out and that he was not to worry. That very night, he got a promise from Madhava. 'Don't worry about money. You give it back if you want to. You don't

have to, either. The most important thing is that, unlike last year, you should finish your examinations.'

Rama was content. He could fulfil his obligation by teaching music. He could work somewhere and pay back the balance. There was no need to worry about money and so, he occupied himself wholly with his studies.

He had enough and more of God-given intelligence and imagination. Would he find his B.A. difficult? By the time April arrived, he had crossed the border and sighed with relief. The time for going back home had arrived. He wondered whether he should return home or look for a job in Madras itself. He had made up his mind to put some sparkle into his mother's lonely life.

So, before leaving, he wandered in the hot sun of Madras, knocking on office doors with application in hand. Would the economic depression that had enveloped the whole world leave Madras alone? He saw 'No Vacancy' boards stuck on entrances everywhere. At last, there came the chance of a job with a salary of fifteen rupees. 'Should I stretch my hands for just that much after having studied so hard and for so long? Can't I earn that much money by teaching?' he asked himself. Finally, he decided to wait for the results of the B.A. examinations. He could learn book-keeping and go to Mumbai. The whole of Dakshina Kannada had gone there, he thought.

One day, he made up his mind to go back home. That evening he took Ananda and Jaya to the beach and as they walked on the sand, he told them casually that he was leaving by train the next day, in the evening. He knew that the news would reach the parents.

'Tomorrow?' asked Ananda.

'Yes.'

'You have not finished teaching me that song yet.'

'I need a month to finish teaching you that.'

'When are you coming home again?'

'Why should I come back to Madras again? My stay here is over. I can come only if God wills so and I get a job here. Otherwise, how can I come here with nothing to do?'

'Ramanna must get a job here!' Ananda said.

'Are you upset?' asked Rama

'How can I not be?'

They went back talking along the way. The girl never opened her mouth. Ananda told the parents about Ramanna leaving. Krishnaveni asked him why he was in such a hurry.

'Amma may be thinking about me.' Krishnaveni kept quiet as soon as she began thinking of her sister. 'Yes! Her difficulties are never ending,' she said, and didn't come in the way of his departure. He left by train the very next day. When he got down in Mangalore, he felt like staying on for a few days. His former friends in the hostel were eager to hear him speak about Communism. But he was not keen to say anything on the matter. He did not want to touch on matters of patriotism and world salvation when his own future hung in the balance.

He went to his uncle Sadashiva's house of his own choice. Sadashiva had come to Airodi when his grandmother passed away. Something sad happened there, too. Sadashiva had talked to Nagaveni. 'Don't retain anything that Lalithé might have said in your mind. Amma had to come here to die because of what she had said. I couldn't take care of her at least for a few days.' He had asked Rama not to think of him as someone distant. So, Rama went there. Lalithé talked to him more gently than before. Before he returned home, Rama looked desperately for a teaching post or any other job in Mangalore. He discovered that there were many who were also wandering around like him in the urban wilderness of that town. 'What is happening? Just as a chapter of hope was ending, a mountain of frustrations has raised its head,' he thought, and left for home.

Perhaps even Shabari might not have waited for Lord Rama in the forest with as much eagerness as Nagaveni awaited

her son's arrival. From the moment his examinations ended, she had been longing for him and wondering why he hadn't come as yet.

Only God knew how Nagaveni had spent that year. She didn't get much help from Narayanappa's house. The children had the upper hand in that family. He could not go against the wishes of his children even to the extent of giving away a paisa in charity. When he had asked Nagaveni to stay on there after her mother's death, he had been taken to task. Fortunately, Nagaveni had left on her own. He now went to Kodi just as a formality. If he found that his children were not at home, he would secretly carry with him a seer of rice for her. Bachchi's husband raised his permanent lease by three times and provided her with meals. So, Nagaveni felt as if she was snatching food away from Bachchi for her own meals. With semi-starvation, she grew thin as a stick. When her son came, she had to rush to Narasimhayya's house to borrow some rice for a meal! That too without letting her son know about it!

The only desire that stayed with her all those days was that her son might find a job sometime in the future. Otherwise, Bachchi's prediction should come true. One night, after the son had eaten, the two started talking, sitting on a coconut frond in the yard. 'Amma, the demon examination is over. All I need to do now is to beg for a job somewhere. How are you? Tell me. However hard I tried, I could not earn a paisa there. Instead, I had to take a loan of a hundred and fifty rupees from Chikkappa.'

Nagaveni found no need to hide anything from him. 'This is what happened. Nothing came from Airodi. The children there have come of age and have snatched away Chikkappa's authority. Here, I had to raise Kaala's lease from six measures to seven so that I could survive. Bachchi's husband had to agree because he was under our obligation. He says he will carry on with cultivation this year but that he is not keen working on the field if the lease stipulates seven measures. He hasn't as yet signed on any paper for the lease this year. It is time for sowing. Shall I cultivate it myself? Is it possible

for me to do it?' The mother had laid bare her poverty before her son. Rama realised where he really was. He discovered that unless he started to work soon, his mother had no way to survive. The raising of Kaala's lease payment made him hang his head. His ideas of socialism and his hatred of capitalism sank to the bottom of his mind.

Poor souls! That night, they both wept in anguish and slept. Even their conversation didn't go on for a long time like it had on former occasions. Even what was said was full of pain, sorrow and anxiety, instead of joy and exhilaration.

The next day, his mother said, 'Worry about tomorrow when it arrives. Think of now. Ask Kaala if he wants the field on lease or whether he wants us to take it over ourselves. My mouth has gone dry with repeatedly asking Bachchi. What can she do? Isn't the husband the master of the house?'

Rama had to undertake a strange negotiation. They had to raise the lease deliberately by three measures of rice from the land on which they didn't themselves work. That was because they happened to be the owners. If they didn't do so, the mother, and the son, (if he stayed at home), had to starve. All that fuss for about twelve rupees! He had earned twice as much by giving tuition. They had to be unfair to a poor man just for that small sum. That was what his conscience, which had remained pure since his childhood days, felt at that moment.

If he didn't ask Kaala for more and if they didn't cultivate the land themselves, there was a possibility that they would have to pay more to the Udupi landlord. So, he went to the labourer's house. For the sake of convention, he asked Kaala how he was. Bachchi's husband was sitting with his legs stretched out because of rheumatism. His eighteen-year-old son was massaging them. 'I go on like this, Odeya,' Kaala said, 'waiting for death.' He talked a lot about his family problems. How could a person like Rama pick up enough courage to say what he had in mind?

Meanwhile, Bachchi said to her husband, 'You must tell the master definitely whether you will undertake cultivation

this year or not. He must have come here to find out about it. You are making it difficult for him. It is like talking about one's problems before a tax collector.'

Rama spoke quietly. 'I just came to avoid the fuss of having to pay the lease when the land is lying barren without cultivation.'

'Ayya, are you the kind of people who would not help us? I know the situation of your household as well. In my present condition, I don't have the courage to say that I will cultivate. I have very young children at home. If the lease payment is increased, I am finished. Would you want me to take a loan and pay you?'

Rama came back home. 'Amma, should we raise the lease amount in order to make a living? Moreover, what facilities do we have to start cultivation this year itself? As for taking help from Airodi, what you tell me scares me. Never mind. We can ask Bachchi to carry on with the existing terms of the lease.' His mother was also of the same mind. So, they kept the severity of their poverty to themselves.

Nagaveni had borrowed rice from Narasimha Mayya. Knowing her son was coming home, she had not taken out anything until he arrived. Now, she started making some gruel with a little rice. Pepper and salt were available at home. Nagaveni had used the salt Sathyagraha very well for her own benefit. She had a tamarind ball brought over by Bachchi from the village in the east. It was six months since any jaggery had entered her house. Rama had eaten well at Krishnaveni's house in Madras. Though he found it difficult to relish the sparsely prepared food at home, the test he had passed in the prison at Vellore came to his aid. But he didn't like to see his mother struggling to cover herself with the few clothes she possessed. Some days later, he remembered to give her the violin strings he had bought for her. She said at once, 'It would have been much better if you had bought me a sari! It is over six months since the strings of the violin snapped. Why do starving people need music?' He really felt anguished, wondering whether he could at least save her dignity.

Rama didn't step outside, after coming home. Bachchi would hear the strains of the violin at night and say, 'Odeya is still here.' Rama wanted to go to the sea, though he had no desire to go elsewhere. But he wanted to go with his mother. But, realising that she didn't have clothes that she could wear outside the house, he too stayed home. When it became dark, he would go to the seashore with his mother. The heat of Vaishakha, the peaceful sea, a cloudless sky, made him say that his sea was never so dull before. The mother said that the rainy season would start later than usual. Neither had the energy to say anything more. Once in a while, when they talked, he would say, 'Amma, do you know where Appa is? I feel like seeing him once.'

'What would you gain by that?'

With that, any enthusiasm that remained about that subject would die down. Both would sit talking for a long time and return home, bored. Sighing in the summer heat, they would toss around on the bare floor of the verandah.

Rama who followed his mother into the kitchen, store room, verandah and the cowshed, discovered how much rice was inside. So, he decided to find a way out before the rice was exhansted.

Once, he remembered something. 'Amma,' he said, 'You had written that you found some money in the crack of a wall. Which wall was that? Subbatté also said that that Grandfather had the habit of making a hole in the wall and keeping money there. I keep dreaming that we might find a treasure there, now that we have nothing at all.' His mother laughed. 'The money you gave my sister came back here. She told me not to tell you. That was why I wrote so in my letter.'

Rama felt like laughing. But he felt disappointed too. The next moment he said, 'Amma, how much difference there is between Lalithamma and Chikkamma! Chikkamma treated me just like one of her own children. When I was leaving, she asked me tell you thrice to visit her.'

'It must have been God who gave her that temperament. If everyone was like her, would the world be like this?'

'Amma, I don't think it will be easy for me to find a job. I can at least teach music and earn ten to fifteen rupees. But can you stay on here like this until I find a way out? What can I earn in this village?'

'There is nothing here.'

'So why don't you go to Chikkamma's house and stay there for a while? She will be very happy as well. It would be easier for me to look for a job without worrying about you.'

'She is a good woman. She is like God. But I don't feel like leaving this place until the day you can take me with you.'

Rama could say nothing. The next day, unable to sit idle, he went to Narasimha Mayya's house. Narasimha was much older than Rama. He ran a prosperous household with income from his property and from Bangalore. He welcomed Rama and asked him many questions about his welfare. After talking about this, that and the other, he asked Rama, 'I believe you know how to play the violin very well. Shouldn't we who belong to you, listen to you playing?'

'Why not? But I can't say that there is anything special about my playing.'

'How long will you be here? What are you going to do in future?' Rama, without trying to conceal anything, pointed to the sky above. 'I don't know how you people who know English feel. But I will tell you anyway. My brother's hotel is in Bangalore. My brother Janardana is there. It is a place where many important people come and go. He says he would like to have a manager who knows English. You are one of us anyway. He will give you meals and twenty rupees a month. If you think it is beneath your dignity, I won't put pressure on you.'

Rama started thinking. This was new to him but it was necessary for him to work, though he couldn't imagine working in a hotel.

He dined with them that night and played the violin as well. Narasimha Mayya, who had travelled around quite a bit,

said, 'That's not bad, Rama. Your playing has attained maturity.' Without stopping, he went on. 'Teach my daughter Lakshmi how to sing. I shall give you something. I know the situation your mother is in. What do you say?'

In his words Rama found that certain air of dignity of the prosperous man, along with affection for Rama Aithala's grandson. If the heat of enmity of the past had remained in him, could Rama's mother have borrowed rice from them?

Rama had to wait till his results were out. He decided to sell his knowledge of music and started teaching Narasimha Mayya's daughter, Lakshmi. His mother too felt lighter in her mind.

~27~

Teaching music to Narasimha Mayya's daughter had begun. Rama needed a job till the results of his B.A. examination were announced. Things were uncertain even after that and so he had taken up the job. His disciple was totally bereft of a singing voice. She had neither talent nor desire to learn singing. Rama dared not say it to her father. If he did, what would happen to the four or five rupees that could be earned?

Within a month, he was set free from the dilemma. He had passed in first class as expected. Krishni's husband Madhava wrote from Madras congratulating him. He also said that he would try for a job for Rama. Now that his studies were over, Rama talked to his mother. 'Amma, I cannot make a living here with my education. I must go out somewhere. But you can't be alone here. If I get a job, you and I can stay together.' He started thinking all day long but could see the problem about his future assuming large proportions. At that juncture, Narasimha Mayya placed four rupees in his hand as fees for

teaching music to his daughter. He was extremely happy at that moment and bought a new sari for his mother that very day. 'Amma, let us go to the beach tomorrow,' he said.

Nagaveni told him what Narasimha Mayya had already told him. 'I believe he has spoken to you about a job in Bangalore.' His face fell. What should he do? There was no other job in sight. The experience of having wandered around in Madras was discouraging. He was certainly not willing to keep his mother in anguish and poverty any longer. Should he take up a job in a hotel? He had heard from Subbatté about several fights that had taken place between Sheena Mayya and Rama Aithala. He also knew what scorn his grandfather had for money earned from running a hotel. Though he didn't feel it was petty to work in a hotel, he had strong doubts about serving the same family which his grandfather had hated.

Moreover, what great benefit would it bring? It might bring in twenty rupees. But what more could it offer? There would be no promotion or any such thing. It was clear that it would not solve the problem of how he would live in future. But in that moment of bewilderment, it seemed as if twenty rupees would mean a lot. If he stayed in Bangalore, which was a big city, he would be near Madras. There was hope that he would find a job in either of the two places sometime or the other. Nevertheless, his mind was greatly troubled all night long.

The next day, as soon as evening fell, he said, 'Amma, how long has it been since you went to the seashore in the evening? Come, let's go.' Mother and son stepped slowly along the sand on the beach and Rama kicked up the sand all along the way, spreading it on all four sides and watching the powdered dust. His mother said nothing. What was in her son's mind and what would he say? Was there an end to their suffering? Questions rose in her mind like the sea waves she could see in the distance. One wave swallowed another, and the next wave would swallow yet another.

The sea came near. The sun was lustreless behind the clouds and was disappearing. Even the clouds in the sky were not dark and the sky was colourless. The sun's rays, already

disappearing, lit up the sky cover high above with dim light, probably because a few clouds had been blown away by the light wind. It was red, orange, purple, and for a little while before losing all that beauty, looked like smoke. Rama sat with his legs stretched out near his mother, facing the waves. His hand held a small piece of shell and was drawing all sorts of things on the ground. His childhood hobby was making his fingers dance. On the other side, his mother sat sadly watching the sails of a distant boat. She broke her silence after a very long time.

'It appears as if all boats have stopped coming to the harbour. According to calculations, the rainy season should start within four or five days. This year there hasn't been enough rain even for the seed beds. It will be better if it rains at least now.'

'Hmm....'

'Maybe business is dull this year, or maybe trade in our Hangarakatté is decreasing. Who knows? Very few boats cross the estuary, very few.'

A couple of minutes later, Rama broke out of his strange reverie and asked his mother what she was saying.

She repeated what she had said. 'It must be so. If you go to the harbour, you find more warehouses closed than kept open. They say that there was a lot of business in the harbour in my grandfather's time.'

'Why, even when we were young, whenever we came down from Mangalore, we would stand on the Hangarakatté harbour and count the boats which arrived. Now you don't even notice boats coming. Maybe four or five. Anyway, should we say something or the other to Narasimha Mayya?'

'Yes, Amma. I don't see any other way at present. But how can one live with twenty rupees? If you come with me, I can somehow spend my days.'

'You should go there first, stay for some time, and see if the place is suitable. You might be lucky enough to get another job. If you want, I will come later.'

'If you want . . .? Don't I want you?'

'It is not like that, Rama. Only He knows what I am like when you are not here. But if we go together to a place that you haven't seen, wouldn't it be difficult if you happen to dislike the job?'

'That's right. But you didn't sound as if you were willing to come.'

'It's not like that. I know the difficulties here, but your grandfather built a house here and passed away. I was there with him when he died. Only I know what his heart's desire was. If I have to leave the house and go away, I shall consider it a great misfortune. But, if it is God's will, what can we do?'

'Amma, what has God got to do in all this?'

'That's right. There is no use blaming God. But such things are not under our control either.'

Meanwhile, as they sat talking, a strong wind started blowing. The sand blew up into their eyes and faces and clouds started gathering in the sky. 'It looks as if it is going to rain heavily. Let us go home quickly. Maybe the rainy season will start right now,' Nagaveni said.

They started walking back home hastily. Though it was not late evening, it became dark. The coconut trees swayed their heads like cobras in heat. It became difficult for them even to walk on the beach with their eyes open. Somehow or the other, they ran and reached home. Lightning followed the wind immediately. Rain, thunder and wind shook the darkness all at once. As soon as she stepped into the house, Nagaveni wondered, 'The poor people in the boats! What can they do in the sea? That's why no one takes boats out at the end of summer. Who knows where that boat was from or where it was going? I hope it at least reaches Hangarakatté harbour.'

For a long time their conversation was about the hurricanes in the past, the sinking of ships and the many accidents that took place in the estuary at the end of the rainy season.

At night Nagaveni remembered the lonely sailing boat that she had been staring at earlier. There was no let up in the rain the whole night, nor did the wind subside. They couldn't sleep either. Nagaveni got up at midnight. 'Rama, I shall just have a look at the cowshed. Gangé and Thungé might not have slept! The cowshed had not been thatched last year. The roof might have been leaking all though this year.' She realised that the lamp held in her hand might not survive in the wind and so she went out in the light of the flashes from the sky. Rama followed her. By the time they reached the yard, they were totally drenched. What did they see there? The whole roof of the shed had been torn off and water was pouring in. Both the cow and the calf stood trembling and wet. Thungé and Gangé mooed, looking at Nagaveni and asking for pity. 'I shall clean up the dung tomorrow. Come, I shall tie you up in the verandah,' said Nagaveni, untethering them. Rama held the calf and Nagaveni brought in the cow. After tying them up in the verandah, they went in and rubbed their chests and bodies and lay down trembling. They didn't have anything warm to cover themselves with.

But Nagaveni kept thinking about the shed. If it wasn't thatched that year, it would be flattened to the ground. Where could she get the grass for thatching? It was available only when there was cultivation.

'Amma, doesn't Soora's son have grass? Won't he let us borrow some?'

'He may give it if we say that we won't raise the lease money. But, if we make that the condition, it may be difficult.'

The rest of the night was spent somehow or the other in fitful sleep. Even when they woke up, Thungé and Gangé didn't get up. There was no way they could be tied up in the cowshed again. The whole village was waterlogged with the rain of the night before. The tank was agog with the croaking of frogs and the rain was relentless. As they had guessed, the rainy season had indeed stepped in.

Nagaveni got anxious. She braided coconut fronds like mats to thatch the shed somehow or the other. But she was

afraid that the walls might be damp, and collapse by the time the rotting grass was taken off the roof in the relentless rain and the shed, thatched again. Soora's son Kaala was sick in bed and his children had started sowing. Bachchi brought five hundred bundles of hay and even they were getting wet in the rain. Under such circumstances, Rama himself went up the roof in the rain and pushed in the fronds as well as he knew. Nagaveni threw up the bundles to him one by one. The roof was thatched somehow and it was a terrible sight to see! But they hoped that it could see the rainy season through, and shed their anxiety.

Nagaveni went to Narasimha Mayya's house and discussed the job offer made to her son. He decided to give money in advance for the journey and wrote to his brother in Bangalore about the arrangements made. Within a few days, Rama hugged his mother, and before leaving, said, 'Amma, take whatever money you want from Narasimha Mayya. Let them deduct it from my salary. Swear that you won't stay half starved.' He left the village in the rain. It was difficult for him to keep his bedroll from getting wet as he got on to the bus holding an umbrella.

Nagaveni once again had time enough to indulge in her song of loneliness. She waited for her son's letter everyday. He wrote on the very day he reached and said he was safe.

For many days, his letters were short as far as his own welfare was concerned. They were full of anxious questions about his mother. She too kept writing to him. In his very first letter, he had prayed to God asking for his mother to be able to join him there. He never wrote about it again. 'Amma, I was happy to hear that you have borrowed a measure of rice from Narasimha Mayya. Why didn't you ask for some cash also? I am getting food here. I need a little money only to write letters. I have no other expenditure. If possible, we can pay back what had been borrowed from Krishnaveni's husband,' he wrote. He had decided not to think of living independently until the debt had been paid off.

But, as the stay lengthened, his eagerness to get his mother over decreased. He did not indicate that in his letters,

though his thoughts were along those lines. Was it possible to rent a small place and live on twenty to thirty rupees? Even if they could, what happiness would she get? Moreover, he needed to send money to look after the house in the village. Nagaveni kept asking him about his welfare and showed no desire to come over. A letter arrived six months later from Rama, strengthening her own feelings. 'Amma, I am longing to have you here so we could spend time together. I am looking forward to that day. But even if you come here, you won't escape a sort of hellish existence. Poverty will, of course, be there. But how long will I remain at home? I get up at five in the morning and sit in the hotel. I am there till midday. Then I eat there and rest for half an hour. Then I continue there till lights are put out around eleven o'clock. When I lie down to sleep, my whole body aches. If you come here, will we have a minute even to talk to each other? Should I ask you to leave our airy house and come here to sit in a corner chanting? Maybe it would be better for me to come there once a year and talk to you.'

Once, he had written about his begging for jobs. 'I have indeed met quite a few people on coming here. I have made friends with some prosperous people who come to the hotel. I am quite free and easy with them. So I asked if there was any job anywhere. Everyone gives assurances and talks about the influence he wields but nothing really happens. It is not as if I am not trying hard enough. All that I have been doing is to apply to places where there are vacancies but, so far, it has been a waste of postage stamps. We need people to prop us up. Only disappointing letters have been coming from Madras. The debt in Madras will be cleared at the end of the year. After that, I feel like going to Madras to hunt for a job there. It is a big city and it seems there are a lot of our people there. Maybe I will find a job which will give me a higher salary.'

His own song of daily life was in another letter. 'I sit here in the morning. Once I sit on the chair, the only work I do is to count money and write letters. Once in two hours, Mayya's brother comes, takes out all the notes and puts them in another box. It is six months since I arrived. Nevertheless,

the way he counts the money or looks at me makes me wonder whether he thinks he has given his keys to a thief. Sometimes, I wonder why he makes me sit here despite that. This must be because none of them knows any English. Right in front of our own hotel, there is someone who knows English and is running his own hotel. Many students and friends come there. The hotel owner speaks in English with them. Our manager believes that the dignity of that hotel is enhanced by the use of English and so he has called me over. But how can he trust me? After all, it is money, isn't it? When I think of that, I wonder if I should stay here for the mere twenty rupees I earn every month. Another amusing thing: Everyday he checks the accounts, checks the worn out and counterfeit coins and takes it out of my salary. The worn out coins stay with him. Our clients are no less shrewd. Even though I keep an eye, someone or the other brings and slips in worthless coins. That too in the evening when business is brisk. If such people come, there is no time even to check what they give before taking it.

'Sometimes, I think of finding someone who will learn music, but even that has been futile. No good words come out of the mouths of the few good singers who come here. What did your teacher tell you? Moreover, there are more music teachers here than pupils....'

Rama was happy that his mother would not lack food or, for the first time, clothing. He was right in thinking so, and at the end of the year, he sent Madhava a hundred rupees from his savings. Madhava wrote back scolding him. 'What's the hurry? Did we ask for the money? Why did you do such a thing in such difficult times? Are we Marwadis who have lent you money? Just because someone distrusted you, do you think we are all like that too?' Rama remembered their kindness yet again. Eventually, he wrote back apologising and, to cheer them up, said that he would visit them first and then go home. By the return post, Ananda's letter reached him. The refrain in it was, 'Have you forgotten us, Ramanna?'

Summer came and Rama's mind was pleading for rest. He had had enough working in the hotel but he needed money

to go home. If he went and stayed there, there would be no salary. He would have to come back. He didn't want to bring his mother back with him, nor did he want to stay away. Amidst all that, there was also the thought of visiting Bombay for a couple of months to look for jobs. That would be possible only after staying where he was for another year.

Wasn't Nagaveni longing to see her son? 'Take leave and come home in summer. Your hair will turn grey thinking of money all the time. If we are lucky, days will pass somehow. If not, it will be the same as now.'

Within a week, she wrote again to say that Narasimha Mayya had asked her what her son was doing that summer. He had said that Rama could come home. It seemed as if he had told his brother to send Rama home at his expense. Rama was quite surprised when he heard of it. He thought perhaps that Narasimha was happy with his work and honesty. They must have profited by that and Mayya wanted to see him, he thought. Even if his salary was increased from twenty to twenty five rupees, it was a great favour. But he thought he would have profited more if his sixteen hours of drudgery was reduced to twelve hours at least. Anyway, the hotel owner counted twelve rupees to Rama for his trip home. 'If you need more, it can be taken out of your account,' he said. Rama had kept the month's salary without sending it home or spending it. So, he was quite content and left.

A letter from his brother to Mayya arrived soon after Rama left. Narasimha Mayya sent word to Nagaveni. His brother Janardana had written to him two days earlier when Rama hadn't arrived yet. Rama went straight to Madras and made Madhava's house radiant with his gratitude and affection. He struggled for a couple of days once again in front of offices, hoping to find a job. He reached home a week after leaving Bangalore. He called 'Amma' to his heart's content, and spoke to his mother.

That night he came forward to clear up after eating his meal. 'Amma, washing up is for tomorrow. Everything else too. Look at the moonlight outside. Because I have come, it,

too, has come. Let's us go the beach, sit there and talk for a long time. Shall I take the violin with me?' he asked eagerly.

They both went out with their minds at ease and stood on the beach. There was no wind blowing but the weather was cool. 'Let's sit here on the sand and not go to the sea,' Nagaveni said. The son said yes and stood there. Seeing his mother sit down, he sat down too and asked her if she was tired. 'No,' she said, 'But I don't feel enthusiastic about anything.'

Afterwards, Nagaveni brought up a new piece of information she had received. 'I cannot say anything. I don't know how you feel about it. I shall tell you what he told me.' She told him of the topic that Narasimha Mayya had brought up after asking her to come home. 'He wants you to marry his Lakshmi. He said we were neighbours and not strangers to each other. Then he said he had three or four hotels. He says you could manage one of them and get half of what it earns. You need not feel that you're working for him. He wanted to write to you. But I did nothing, thinking it would be better to talk to you when you came here.'

Rama laughed and asked, 'Have you given them any answer?'

'No. What do you feel about it? If you like that girl, maybe we can go ahead. She has studied a little in the village school. You will have to get married some day or the other. Moreover, who will give a girl to poor people like us? But you are the one who is marrying. I didn't tell him anything, not knowing whether you would be happy with the proposal.'

'Amma, leave alone the girl. Should I get caught up in an obligation because of their hotel and the share that I get? We may have to listen to them claim that I became prosperous only because of their daughter. And now, for the management of the hotel. Money may be earned anyhow if one is lucky. But I am fed up with my job which gives me no leisure. I might have picked up the violin only three four times after going there!'

'Let that be. You have taught the girl. What do you think of her? Her looks are average.'

'I didn't find any special sense, quality or intelligence in her. I have heard her talking to elders. It sounded as if she longed for gold and jewellery. If in future she is loaded with gold, we cannot even dream of looking after her. Moreover, if she remembers that they are rich and I am poor, her respect towards me won't last long either.'

'That's true, child. But are you saying that you don't want to think of marriage at all? What would you say if we found a girl with a good horoscope or an alliance with a good family?'

'Amma, are you under an illusion? It is only after we find a way to feed ourselves that we can think of bringing another life home and shouldering the responsibility for it. More responsibilities will follow later. Why should a man who works sixteen hours a day for twenty rupees, have a family? Who will be happy then?'

Neither spoke for a long time. Finally, Rama asked his mother to play something. She took the violin and played an old song. No matter what she did, its flow reflected only pain and anguish. She would sigh after finishing each song. In her life, ennui had taken root all over like a banyan tree.

They both sat there singing and talking and went back home after they felt bored and sleepy.

The next day, Rama asked if the roof of the cowshed had withstood the rain. 'Your roof! It did stay up somehow or the other. But this year, the whole thing will have to be pulled down. Grass, coconut fronds and cane — everything will have to be new. It may cost ten to fifteen rupees. Ten or fifteen rupees is a frightening matter. But there is no way out. It has to be done,' she said. Rama asked how much milk Gangé yielded. Gangé and Thungé were both with calf. Though there was no milk right then, within two months they would both start giving milk. But Rama wouldn't be at home then. Nagaveni said that one of the two could be sold.

Nagaveni went to Mayya's house that afternoon. In order to be tactful about Rama saying no to the offer of marriage, she said that Rama had no thought of marrying at the moment. Mayya gave a lot of advice to Nagaveni. 'Do you know why Lachcha went astray? I have heard that it was because he did not get married when he came of age. Isn't Rama old enough now? He must be twenty-two or twenty-three. When will he marry if he says no now? The children of today don't know anthing. When they become old and withered, no one will give them a bride even if they beg. What is it to me? Our Lakshmi is not all that old. She has a lot of gold on her. Fortunately, our family has a good name. An alliance will come from somewhere. But shouldn't your son look out for what is good for him?'

Nagaveni went back home feeling listless. She told her son everything as soon as she came back home. After that, Rama went to visit the boss twice or thrice. Nothing more happened other than Lakshmi prancing in front of him wearing chunks of gold.

It was a fortnight since he had come home. He would have to get back to Bangalore within a few days and start thinking about things. A new roof had been put up in a great hurry. New clothes were provided for his mother. He had run to Subbatté's house and come back in haste. In order to spend one night at least in Padumunnooru, he had gone to the Shanubhog's house too. Instead of asking Rama about his job, the Shanubhog asked whether he had no thoughts of feeding them with payasa at his wedding. Rama laughed. 'What do we lack now? We have payasa everyday. The only thing that remains is to feed the girl who comes home the same thing.'

'What do you mean?'

'Aren't our tears the same as payasa?'

The Shanubhog laughed. 'What are you saying? Is there no likelihood of finding a good job? You are educated. How long can you be a servant in Mayya's hotel?'

When Rama was in Bangalore, he had learnt that his grandfather in Airodi had passed away. So, he didn't have to go there. Anyway, it was time for him to leave for Bangalore.

He reached Bangalore and began his daily drudgery. The first day of his second year was over, then the second, the third and the fourth as well. He kept counting days. In between, letters went to his mother and letters arrived from her. But his letters lacked zest and contained nothing special. As a matter of fact, it was Nagaveni who wrote letters to give him courage. But something that had happened recently had brought him happiness.

A month before Navarathri, a letter arrived from Madhava. They were all going home because of his daughter's wedding. They were going to Mysore and Bangalore, would stay on for the Dasara festival, and take a break before moving on. That was what the children desired. Rama was worried that he might not have spare time when they arrived. Dasara was a time when the city would be filled with tourists, a time when hotels did good business. No one who came to Mysore went back home without seeing Bangalore. His hotel would get a share of the money spent by the tourists during their stay in the city.

Just to ensure that no problems would crop up later, Rama talked to his boss well in advance. 'My uncle's family is coming and I also wish to see Dasara,' he said. The boss wasn't angry and said yes. 'You can go to Mysore in advance and stay in our hotel there. You can relax there. There will be a greater rush over there than here, at that time. If everything goes well, I am thinking of opening a temporary shop near the race course.' The subject of shops might or might not have pleased Rama, but he was happy to get an opportunity to go to Mysore.

He decided to wander around with Madhava, Krishnaveni, Ananda and Jaya from the moment they touched Bangalore till they left Mysore.

The happy day arrived. Rama had already reserved accommodation for them. He took them around the city and talked endlessly with Ananda. The one who wouldn't talk to him was his student Jaya. She was dumb-struck with shyness. Madhava's eldest son had stayed on in Madras for his studies.

There was just one thing about which Madhava felt inexpressibly sad. 'What shall I do, Rama? I couldn't find a job for you. A lot of B.A. graduates offer to work even for twenty rupees. It has now become the practice to push out those getting twenty rupees, as soon as someone is found who's ready to work for fifteen rupees. Here, you are getting twenty rupees besides food. This seems better. But the atmosphere in Madras is better. If you feel so too, we can look for a job there,' Madhava said. Rama told him of his desire to go to Bombay.

They travelled together from Bangalore to Mysore. Though the impressive roads, gardens and mansions did not appear exotic to him, they soothed the eyes of the visitor from Bangalore. It was a joyful occupation for him to wander about with his aunt and children. He visited the hotel of his boss. The Navarathri festival was over. The next day, Madhava left for Mangalore with his family. After seeing them off, Rama longed to rest a while in Mysore and perhaps go to the music concert held in the palace.

There was the Dasara exhibition as well. He had gone around it and seen the painting section in a hurry once before. He wanted to see it again. He wandered round the exhibition from morning till evening like a fool and saw a few beautiful paintings which made him lose himself in dreams. 'Why shouldn't I learn to paint?' he thought, and remembered his hands busy drawing on the floor at home and all over the beach. There was not a single picture of the sea among the paintings that had come for the exhibition. If he had learnt the art, he might have painted the sea. Why hadn't the sea attracted anyone?

He spent the night dreaming about the kingdom of art. The next day, he went with the hotel manager to see the city. The manager was mad about horse-racing and took Rama along to the race course. Why shouldn't he watch horses run? Rama went along because he hadn't seen it so far. But he wasn't willing to buy a ticket and be an interested spectator. He stood on the green grass bank outside and watched the horses run. Though the race had no effect on him, the enthusiasm of the people gathered there and the movement of motor vehicles did leave an impression on his mind.

The races were over. His hotel friend Keshava, having lost ten rupees, stepped out with a long face. He came out with an old man. 'Do you know who this is?' he asked with a smile. The old man also smiled. Rama looked blankly at their faces. He couldn't recognise the old man.

'Rama,' said the manager, 'this man belongs to our village. Don't you recognise him?'

'I don't know my village well, as I grew up outside it.'

'This man is from our own village.'

Rama had nothing to say.

'Don't you know this boy either? You belong to the older generation and must have seen him.'

It seemed as if the old man was hiding something deliberately. 'Rama, this man owned a big hotel called Great Durbar Restaurant. It no longer exists. I used to work for him.'

Rama remembered certain things that his elders had talked about. 'Is this the brother of our boss? Orata Mayya?' he asked, looking at the man's face.

'You are right.'

'Who is this?' the old man asked in turn.

'Isn't he the son of your friend? Rama Aithala's grandson?' asked Keshava.

The man was surprised. 'I don't think our Lachcha has even seen the boy after he grew up.'

'Rama, your father stays with this man. He can't move about too much and stays in bed for eighteen days in a month because of rheumatism. Don't you want to go and see him?' Keshava asked. Rama couldn't remember having seen his father. But the desire grew, to see him again. Instead of showing enthusiasm by saying, 'Let's go,' he said, 'We shall go in the morning.'

'Aren't you coming to the market now?' asked Keshava. Rama said he wanted to stay on there and so Keshava and Orata went away.

Rama kept staring at Orata's back as he walked away. He had learnt Orata's history from Subbatté and his mother and knew about his father who was Orata's friend. Should he go see him or not? What would his mother feel if she learnt that he had visited his father? This seemed a difficult problem to solve. For a long time he sat breaking sprouts of grass, chewing them and spitting them out. 'Whatever it be, shouldn't I see my father? I believe I last saw him when I was five years old. I can't remember anyway. Shouldn't I see him?'

He went back very late to the hotel. Keshava couldn't leave the hotel until ten o'clock. He said that they could go after the hotel was closed.

'Won't they have slept by then?'

'Neither of them knows the difference between day and night,' came the answer.

His mind was plunged into thought. He was so dazed that he could neither sit there nor get up.

~28~

A house with a sloping roof in a corner forking off from Sreeramapeté in Mysore, the light of a flickering candle within. Though electricity had arrived, the residents had not allowed it to enter their houses. There were just two people inside the house. Lachcha, leaning against the wall, his painful leg stretched out, a beedi in his mouth, and slapping down cards, one by one. Before him, Orata, his companion, no less adorned. Neither of the two was over fifty. Nevertheless, they had the white hair of a seventy-year-old, lustreless eyes and cheekbones that stuck out. All around them, dirt which had not been swept for three days, betel leaves, bits of areca and beedi. They were both playing cards with gusto, shaking their legs, puffing out gusts of smoke, producing noises like

'hoom, hain' and carrying on with the game. There was then the sound of someone knocking on the door. 'Oh! Perhaps the man has arrived!' said Lachchanna. 'Come in,' he shouted from where he sat.

Keshava came in with Rama behind him, feeling apprehensive. 'Hoom,' they grunted by way of welcome and carried on with their game. They did not seem to think that the visitors should be given any attentions. Engrossed in the game, they talked only when the pack was being shuffled. They were not likely to move from that spot even if there was an earthquake. Realising it, Keshava told Rama, 'I will be back soon. I have a friend outside.' Saying this, he abandoned Rama who stood there without blinking his eyes. One game was over and the pack was shuffled for another game. Instead of talk, it was the game that went on.

In between, Orata turned around and asked if Keshava had gone. That was all, and the game went on. Rama didn't want to sit. Not did he find it appropriate to leave. He didn't know how long he stood there meditating. Keshava didn't come back to take him out of the predicament. He was fed up with standing like a rock. 'Mayyaré, hasn't my father come? Is he coming?' he asked Orata. Orata looked back and laughed. 'Who else do you think is playing with me?' he said. Rama's heart leaped up. From the moment he had seen the man with Orata, he hadn't considered the possibility that he might be his father, Rama Aithala's son. He couldn't find the radiance of Subbatté's face, or her facial features and lines, in the man.

He felt that he should not go away without speaking to his father, and so he sat down wearily. Their game was over and Lachcha talked to Rama through Orata, asking when he had come there and where he lived. Rama was sickened by the conceit shown in his not talking to him directly. Rama answered immediately. 'It has been eight days since I arrived here. I am in Bangalore. I am leaving now,' he said, and walked away without waiting for Keshava. His mind was boiling in anger and tears welled up in his eyes for having been born as the son of such a creature. He couldn't understand why his father wouldn't speak to him directly when he had come to meet

him. Realising that there was no use waiting for Keshava, he went straight back to the hotel. He didn't meet Keshava till the next morning when he told him all that had happened the night before. 'That was how he was ruined. He is home to all bad habits. He is here today and in Madras or Puné tomorrow. Who knows how he gets money or spends his days?' Keshava spoke as if he was himself a respectable man.

Rama wanted to stay on in Mysore for a couple more days and listen to the music. But he decided to return to Bangalore, totally put off by the place after the anguish of the night before.

His boss Janardanayya asked Rama how the trip was and what he had seen there. 'Didn't you go to our hotel? How is Keshava? Does he stay in the shop? Does he move around?' he asked.

'He was there when I reached the place.'

'Someone told me that he saw Keshava at the races. If he is among such people, it will be difficult for me to trust him. There seems to be no way other than keeping an eye on him.'

Rama said nothing.

Janardanayya couldn't stay quiet. 'Why don't you say anything? Don't tell me you don't know! My brother Orata and your father were ruined in the same way. Keshava has been with them since the beginning. I have heard that they are still friends. I am worried about leaving our hotel in Mysore in Keshava's charge.'

Rama had his doubts about Keshava. Didn't he see Keshava going to the races right before his eyes, and coming back with Orata? In such circumstances, it wouldn't be right not to answer Janardanayya's questions. So, on the pretext of talking about his father, Rama talked of other matters.

He got on with his daily duties. He told his mother about his trip to Mysore but was ashamed to write about his father.

Within a week, Narasimha Mayya wrote a letter in reply to his brother's. 'Send Rama to the hotel in Mysore. Take Keshava away from there and bring him near you. If his obsession with racing doesn't abate, you don't need him at all.' The very next day, Rama got a letter from his mother. 'Narasimha Mayya told me that you had gone to see your father. Why didn't you write to me about it? What happened? Why did you go?' she had asked. Rama was ashamed. Realising that he shouldn't hide the matter from his mother anymore, he wrote to her in detail.

But he disagreed with the idea of going to Mysore and staying there. 'I don't want the responsibility. You are here to check on money. There, I will be responsible for everything. I don't like that. I may have to hear bad words later. Moreover, Keshava and I have known each other only for a couple of days. I don't want to face the accusation that I displaced him.' Janardanayya didn't say anything. 'Let it be. I will go there myself for a week and find out,' he said, and left. He went to Mysore and had to take Keshava away from there. Rama was forced to go to Mysore to replace him.

He did not like the new job even a bit. In between, something else came up, giving him hope when his boss had gone to Mysore. It has already been said that there was a hotel right in front of the one where he worked as the manager. It was run by an educated man who had heard about Rama. Many had praised his courteous ways and his gentleness. He was educated and so perhaps commanded greater respect than one who was not. He sent word to Rama that he should come over. They were prepared to pay up to thirty rupees a month. But Rama was not attracted by the higher salary. The reason was that he was apprehensive of his obligations at home. If he joined the man, a competitor to Janardanayya, for a mere five rupees more, his mother might face problems at home, he thought. It was the same fear that had made him agree to go to Mysore in the first place.

It was nothing new, working in Shuchi Bhavan Restaurant, as his duties were the same as in Bangalore. When the tourist season was over, there was not much business.

But he had to stay there regardless. Earlier, the boss would be there to keep an eye on things. Here he was alone and was scared.

And another thing. It was true that he had arrived in that town and that the chair on which he sat was his kingdom. He had no leisure at all. Even so, he would read the newspaper and, in between, count the money while people moved around.

On the very day after he arrived, a disaster occurred. As the hour hand on the clock touched five, Lachcha entered the hotel, coughing. It was not as if Rama had not seen him. Remembering what had happened before, he didn't venture to offer any hospitality or talk to him. In a short while, Lachcha finished eating and started going out. The boy who had served him shouted, 'Ché Anna' as was the fashion in those days. On his way out after eating, Lachcha took out a cigarette, lit it from a lamp on a table near where Rama sat, thus making him notice his arrival, and went away as if nothing whatsoever had happened. Rama wrote Ché Anna in his own account. The fact was that although he and Orata had got together and started Delhi Durbar Hotel to bring down Narasimha Mayya's hotel, and had suffered losses, he had come back there for refreshments. That seemed stranger to Rama than the fact that he had walked away without paying the bill.

The next morning, Lachcharaya came again and spent Ché Anna. The same thing as the day before happened for another two or three days. It became certain to Rama that it would be a daily occurrence. Rama had to set aside seven rupees from his twenty-five for the Ché Anna twice a day. Shouldn't the father who had given him birth do at least that much for his son? Rama was amused and wrote about it to his mother. 'What pity and what compassion does an oil press have as long as there is some oil to squeeze out!' was the reply. But, before her reply arrived, he was faced with another predicament. Lachcharaya, Orata and a few other gentlemen came there in a group for their evening refreshments. Orata ordered whatever he wanted and treated his friends. As soon as they finished eating, they ordered for Scissors, and a pack of cigarettes arrived. They chatted until the pack was half

finished and started leaving. 'Sava Rupiah,' the server shouted. The leader of the group, Orata, descended the stairs, pointing the way to the rest of the group. The ones at the back stared at Rama and left. Within a few days, the Ché Anna and Sava Rupiah got together and crossed the limit of over ten rupees. Rama was in deep distress that evening. While he was going through his slavery for the sake of his mother, should the benefit be taken away from her to feed a pitiless tiger? He was very upset and decided to pay only for his father, and that too, within limits. Otherwise, he would be stern, he told himself. Within about eight days, his desire to see his father had melted away and there was disgust instead.

The incident next day had a totally different end. Orata and Lachcha came to the hotel for breakfast. They finished eating, smoked cigarettes and left after Ché Anna. When they crossed Rama's table, empty handed, he bent his head and said, 'Six Annas.' The sound of his voice stopped neither of the two men. As they walked on as if they hadn't heard, Rama said angrily, 'Call them here, they haven't paid.' His eyes looked angry and his voice was stern. The servant stopped them and brought them over. Orata spoke as if he had been insulted. 'Ayya, look here! Oh, children, these days! This man here is this boy's father and he is stopped and asked to pay for a drop of coffee he had! What have we come to?' he said mockingly. The noise made everyone turn and look at Rama. They could understand nothing. Rama realised that there was no use talking to them. 'Boys, tell them that there is no coffee for both of them here from tomorrow. Do you understand? There is no obligation of any kind here!' Orata became angrier. 'The purpose of your being born has been fulfilled!' he cursed and went away. Those that had gathered around murmured among themselves. Some suspected that Lachcha was indeed Rama's father and it became a matter of great shame to Rama. Who knew what the next morning would bring? He sat waiting to find out how those who had lost their dignity in life would meddle with his own. Seven, half past seven, eight, half past eight, nine — his eyes and lips moved with the hour and the minute hands. But Lachcha and Orata didn't come there because of the fight the day before.

Rama sighed deeply. That evening, he wrote to his mother about the Ché Anna episode. 'However, Amma, there was no need for me to be called that gentleman's son in front of everyone. Nevertheless, doesn't a father have the right to call his son his son?'

At the same time, the news of the episode reached the boss in Bangalore through a letter written by a nameless source. He too came down, but seeing that the boy hadn't included what was spent by his father in his account, but had himself paid it, he was satisfied. The boy was not like his father and was trustworthy, he decided. It was only Rama who was unhappy and so wanted to discontinue work. Slaving without leisure at a job he didn't like, worrying about how long he would have to stay away from his mother, troubled him. 'I feel that this shelter here is heaven itself,' Nagaveni would write. 'I cannot leave this house until the memory of my Mava, my father-in-law is erased. Though he didn't trust his son, he cried looking at me as he lay dying. Though I cannot achieve anything in my life now, should I not have the good fortune of paying back Mava's obligation and love? Shouldn't I do that much at least for his mistake of leaving me this house?'

Rama's desire to travel to Mumbai grew strong. November had arrived. Come December, he would fly there. About a hundred rupees had perhaps been saved. He would stay there and look around. If he could find a job and earn well, he would stay there. He would somehow persuade his mother to join him. Thus, he spent time counting the minutes.

There was no possibility of a hundred rupees being saved before December. Should he not send his mother a little money? But, not wishing to hold back his desire, he decided to go to Mumbai. The most difficult thing was to tell his boss about it. Through his mother, he let Narasimha Mayya know that he was leaving his job shortly. Rama had him write to his brother as well. Janardanayya came down from Bangalore. 'Why do you want to go? Isn't twenty five rupees with food enough for you? Is it possible to look for a substitute all of a sudden? Assured of your being here, I drove away Keshava as well,' he

said. He spoke a lot. Rama told him that he wasn't comfortable with a life that had no leisure. He was going away to earn enough to bring his mother over to stay with him. He made it clear that he had nothing against Janardanayya.

He was one among the Christmas crowd. With people who were packed in carriages, he began his journey to Mumbai without being able to close his eyes. Before leaving, he had written to Madhava in Madras and asked him to write to a few of his friends in Mumbai. He had also written to a friend in advance. Reaching Mumbai was not like entering a forest. But the houses, temples, roads and the crowds appeared to him better than those in Madras. If he could stay there and join that urban life, he would be like a grain of sand on the sprawling beach. It was true that he was as small. But, should that thought end in frustration? Would the city that was feeding such a multitude not show a way to someone like him seeking food? There was even a hope that there were many people in Mumbai who were from his place.

Maruthiraya was waiting in Dadar railway station for Rama to arrive from Mysore. Neither knew the other. Nor were they related even distantly. They were not of the same caste either. Madhava was working in a company which sold paints in Madras. Maruthi was employed in the Mumbai office of the same company. Moreover, Maruthiraya was from the Kannada-speaking region. This intimacy between them resulted in a welcome being extended to Rama.

Maruthi took him to where he was staying. They both walked up to Matunga while a man carrying Rama's bed and small box followed them. They climbed the steps of a building in Matunga and stood before a small room,and the door opened. There was a place ahead which was not even as big as the verandah in Rama's house. Within that was the kitchen, the bath and the office. They both went in. 'My family is not here now. I have sent them home. One of my boys is here while another has gone home with his mother. She is expecting a baby. We have food brought from outside. Share it without feeling shy,' said Maruthi, offering hospitality in a plain-spoken manner.

Rama knew where he was going to stay for a few days from then on. He thought he could share the expenditure and spend some time there. Rama started living like Maruthi who had learnt to live a well-structured life within the small but neat house. Maruthi had taken leave that day because of Rama. From the next day, Maruthi could be with him till ten o'clock. Then he could see him only in the evening. Maruthi's eldest son was like Krishnaveni's son Ananda. He was still very young and went to school in Mumbai. So, when father and son left the house, it was Rama who looked after the place.

On the day Rama arrived, Maruthi talked to him as if he knew the object of his coming. 'I don't know many people here. Our life is confined to this room — a constricted life. My movements are only between the office and home. On Sundays, one can see a few friends. During the rest of the week, the only joy is that we are amidst a sea of people. You can do one thing. In the same building upstairs, some friends from our place are staying. They have some job or the other. There are also some who are unemployed. None of them has a family. They may tell you where it would be useful for you to look around,' he said.

Rama didn't say anything. His job was just to listen. Mumbai was a new place and he didn't know anything about it. He had come to fulfil his desire and his luck had to be tested.

The same night, Maruthi took Rama upstairs to a room where, like the socialists had done, a board was stuck. It said, 'Friends' Room.' The difference between the room of a family man like Maruthi and the room where there was no family was clear. 'Friends' Room' could be called so only because it had four walls. Otherwise, it was just like a zoo. When they went there, there were three among the six or seven, who had unrolled their beds and were lying down. Two were immersed in a political argument. One was singing and another was counting the number of cars that were moving, with lights on, down the road. Someone said, 'Hullo' when he saw Maruthi. 'This is a friend from our District. He has come here to Mumbai

like us. His uncle is a friend of mine and that's how we got introduced to each other,' Maruthi said. He called a person named Shankararaya and told him that he was in special charge of Rama.

Shankara, who was lying down, got up, lit a cigarette and asked them to sit down.

'Did your Padmanabha get a job? He had gone to Mitsui's,' asked Maruthi.

'They have no intention of paying more than forty,' said Shankara.

'He is a graduate, isn't he?'

'It's the same salary for fathers of graduates as well. Now Mumbai has become Madras.'

So, Maruthi said to Shankara, 'Look, he also comes from a poor family. He has come here with so many plans. Though I haven't raised too many hopes in him, let's do what we can.' At that, the day's conversation came to an end with "Good Night". As Rama was leaving, Shankara asked him what his name was.

'Rama.'

'Rama what?'

'Rama Rao, Rama Aithala. Either name will do.'

'Alright, Rama Rao. Keep coming here everyday. You will get to learn something.'

From then on, whenever he was free, he went there to be a member of Friends' Room. He thought he could be one among the friends after Maruthi's family came back to Mumbai.

Those people! They were creatures who could live comfortably and happily among one another. They were all young men, some of whom had completed their studies and were looking for jobs in Mumbai. Some were busy with temporary jobs for three or four months in the year. Some kept changing jobs every fortnight. Some were just interested in wandering around the place. But one definite belief in them

was that Hindusthan would not fare well until Capitalism was gone. That was the only aim that had brought them together.

Their job all night long was to blame Birla, Bajaj, Walchand and such others. The next day they would carry applications to find out if there was a job at Karimbhai's. Would Mitsui do? Killick Nixon? Army and Navy? One business house after another, banking institutions, insurance companies — they would wander around looking for jobs. Even though the job would last only for four days, they would all look for it. Those eight people would get three food carriers and share them. Consequently, they were only 3/8 men in size. They consumed more coffee and tea than rice. They cooked their own meals and ran a community kitchen like in Moscow. Their only luxury was cigarettes. They had decided long ago that the weather in Mumbai made smoking inevitable.

Their clothes? They were very attractive. In that matter, one influenced another. As soon as office work was over, they all wore Khadi kurtas and Pathan-type pyjamas. When office time arrived in the morning, boots, trousers and hats would come out after being given a brushing. All night long, they would be dressed in very little, like prisoners. However, if they were all living so happily, it was never because of the food. It was by merely talking, and that too, about the golden era that would come after Capitalism vanished from the world. Under such circumstances, it was not difficult for Rama, who shared similar dreams, to become one among them. Any unemployed man living in Mumbai did not need more than three weeks to become a Communist. Rama was Red even before he arrived there.

Within a couple of weeks, Rama took a look at a few office name-boards. 'Rama Rao,' said Shankara, 'If one didn't have to spend money on trains or trams in Mumbai, one could live for three months with the same amount. To listen to the melodious music of "No Vacancy" or "Sorry Please," one has to pay a tram tax of four annas every time. One needs about eight rupees a month to listen to this inauspicious music. If I am guaranteed twenty rupees a month, I can live like this permanently in Mumbai. But how can one manage if it rains and trams swallow eight out of the twenty?'

Shankara was an old timer. During his stay, he had lived half his life hanging around offices. He had spent the other half by spending what he had earned. None of the other members of 'Friends' Room' had the wealth of experience he had. Shankara took Rama once in a while to all the places that he himself had been frustrated by. He would also take him to places that he had quit after fighting. Rama wore the boots and trousers he had bought after coming to Mumbai with great devotion, visited many companies, and returned home after getting uninspiring answers.

The only 'hope' for Shankara at that time was the cinema. He would write the scenario and send it to film companies, only to have it returned. His main occupation was to get angry watching films that had been made by those who had stolen his stories. He had received letters from all the film stars in Mumbai and Calcutta. He had sent a lot of photographs of himself acting in various roles. But his sorrow was that not even one director was intelligent enough to recognise his ability. A resolution was passed unanimously to the effect that, if 'Friends' Room' came to power after Independence, cinema directors would be included along with capitalists in the list of people who would be sent to the gallows. The young heroes were quite ignorant about what they should do with the cinema queens who earned five to six thousand a month. They would also gradually become capitalists after getting that kind of salary. But, realising that it was unbecoming to hurt women, they had not arrived at any decision. Moreover, the actresses were also unmarried like themselves, and so this matter posed even greater problems.

To Rama, 'Friends' Room' appeared to be a parody of many of life's renunciations. It was not as if he wasn't aware that their extreme lightheartedness, idleness and snap decisions were a result of unemployment which had caused frustration, destabilising their youth.

Rama had gone to their dwelling in ordinary clothes on the first day. It took three days to get the boots, trousers and coat which were necessary for his job hunt. After wearing them, Rama felt very shy and came looking for Shankara in

the 'Friends' Room.' It caused a great commotion. 'Ramu, pardon me, Rama Rao, you look just like a cinema star in these clothes. He-star! You definitely have a chance in the cinema. If we had such a lovely personality, we would have hung around the neck of Miss Suvarna Devi. But, Rama Rao, you need another qualification apart from good looks. You must know how to neigh!'

'Know how to neigh?' Rama didn't understand what it meant.'What does it mean?' he asked with a smile.

'Music! Rama Rao + Music = A1 Cinema Star,' said Gangadhara who was the most knowledgeable among them as far as cinema was concerned. Rama kept quiet, thinking that that was not the right time to reveal his knowledge of music.

After that, Gangadhara preached to him everyday. 'Go to Andheri today. Check out another studio today.' When he got very enthusiastic, he would sing *'Thumne mujkho prem sikhaya,'* smoking a cigarette stub in between. He was the one who provided cinema news to the group now and then. 'Mister, there is a new bit of news today. That bloody Miss Chandrakantha is really a mother of four! That's why she didn't give a proper reply to my letter. Not only that, she hasn't had the courtesy to send a photograph in return for the photo of me that I had sent her,' he would say. Everyone would laugh and share his disappointment.

On another day, he came in with: 'Shankara, good news today. Remember the man who took your scenario and made you come to Andheri six times? That dirty director Nakhoram? His company, Central Art Production, has gone into liquidation! If what I have heard is true, all these production companies will go bankrupt in twenty years and not a single capitalist bugger will survive!'

Such sweet words rose lightly like cigarette smoke beside the political ideas. In between, the song, *'Bajao prem ki bansuri'* would emerge from Gangadhara.

Once, while talking, Gangadhara and Shankara became inspired. Gangadhara did have a good voice. But he didn't have

the looks. However, that was not what he thought of himself. It was the opinion of a capitalist director! So, Shankara said, 'If Rama's face was atop Gangadhara's neck, our Friends' Room would have a minimum income of two thousand rupees a month. So, Ramu, wouldn't that mean an average salary of two hundred and fifty rupees?'

Rama didn't understand what he meant.

'What did you say?' he asked, and turned around.

'Gangadhara has a good voice and you have good looks. If both could be combined, you would become a film star. That's what I meant.'

'Don't I have a good voice?' Rama asked.

'What will you do with it? Would you hang it? Cinema needs a screaming voice, not just a good voice. As our Gangadhara says, you need a voice that will neigh. Do you know what it means to learn music? You should know *Tumne mujhko prem sikhaya.* That is what cinema is all about.'

Everyone burst out laughing. 'I can sing but I can't neigh. But when cinema horses have to express their love, they should know how to neigh,' Rama smiled and said.

Shankara was very surprised. Did Rama know music? What kind of music? The Taranana of Tamil? The wailing songs of beggars on a train? Renenana of Gawais?

'Rama can sing? What sort of music is yours? Yye, yye, yye... Is that it?' Gangadhara asked.

'My music is of a different kind. I know how to play the violin better than I know to sing. But I can't play *Tumne mujhko prem sikhaya*.'

Rama had never listened to film music. Because of his serious nature, he was not even satisfied with the jugglery of notes in classical music. When that was the case, how could the neighing of love give him satisfaction?

That evening, his talk led to action. There was no way they would let him escape singing. Shankara was eager to

open a 'Communal School of Music' right there and then if Rama knew how to sing. Though it was past ten o'clock, they turned Matunga upside down and procured a violin for Rama. A moment before it arrived, Gangadhara had said, 'There is no place for weepy instruments like veené and violin in an orchestra. They are only for background music and not for the foreground.' He had offered his considered opinion. Gangadhara was the best art critic on the whole floor. He was convinced that his room was Paris and that he was the greatest art critic in the city. There was nothing like doubt or even the slightest hesitation in the judgements he pronounced.

Within a minute after that proclamation, a violin bowed before Rama. He was smiling. Gangadhara's pronouncements and speeches were pleasing to his ears. There might or might not be any essence in what he said, but there was indeed a great deal of foolishness.

Smiling all the while, Rama held up the violin and drew the bow on the strings a couple of times. He drew his hand on the strings, and rubbed and tapped them. His hand was worth watching. It was not a violin, it was a sitar, no, not a sitar but a jalatharanga. It was certainly none of them, but something else altogether, his fingers seemed to say.

His friends watched Rama's mischief with strange smiles. Gradually, the sweet sound sprang all around like droplets from the violin strings. It tumbled and cascaded like a small waterfall over rocks, and spilt over, laughing. It grew and grew and kept spreading like a stream. Like a spring of laughter gushing out from somewhere, spilling out and flowing like a river which the river bed couldn't contain.

After having flowed, expanded, overflowed, and laughed, it suddenly became tranquil. Then the tone subsided like some imprisoned water in a tank. The waves of melody were stilled, and the womb of laughter seemed to have suppressed some unknown pain. Rama was gazing at the bow with half-closed eyes.

The next moment, his hand seemed to have been shaken by anger and all the imprisoned inner agonies burst forth and

darted out in all directions like tongues of flame. Capricious ragas exploded into countless choruses. After the explosion, a single rag-alaapa, that had swallowed both death and life, was developed to bring an end to the music.

Rama stopped playing and got up. He went straight to his room and lay down. His friends waited for him for a long time as if they had been struck dumb. A couple of them came out to look for him. Though Maruthi was sitting, Rama was fast asleep.

No one who had listened to the music said anything that day. 'I haven't heard such music till today. It seemed to expose all the hideous laughter of our lives,' said Shankara.

For many days after that episode, Gangadhara never sang *'Tumne mujhko'* in front of Rama. It wasn't only that. If Rama was approaching, the others would sing *'Tumne mujhko kshama dikhaya'* in Gangadhara's face and ridicule the famine in his music.

For a long time, they kept asking Rama every day when they could hear his music again. 'When I feel like it,' was his answer. They also knew that it was not the kind of music that would show up when summoned. It the people in the room respected anyone, it was Rama.

But what was the use? Their love and respect had not yet provided an answer to the question of unemployment. Two months had passed since his arrival in Mumbai. Half the money he had brought was gone. Days couldn't be spent this way. Shankara suggested that Rama could give music lessons. Rama laughed. 'Who will admire my music in the era of *Tumne Mujhko*? And besides, I don't know the style of the Gawais.'

~29~

Three months passed. It wouldn't be long before Rama's pockets were empty. If months passed and he couldn't find a job, he would be an unemployed, starving, poverty-stricken creature. One day, he went wandering in the city, thinking about things. He had enough of walking and sat on the beach at Chowpatty. The sand was like the sand in Madras, but the sea in front of him carried dirt, and had lost its natural laughter. The sea which had joined the city did not have either its natural strength or its insolence. It was like a tank stirred up by the force of rain. On the shore, however, the sea of people was dancing with the excitement and joy of conversation of various kinds. There they were, people of all classes, going, coming, eating and belching. Though there were so many people, you could sit there as if you knew no one. Rama sat there among the multitude, watching the feeble waves of the sea. He could not stay in the city anymore without working. He was thinking of earning a little money by giving music lessons. It was over a month since he wrote to his mother. What could he tell her? What hope should be aroused in her? His pals in the 'Friends' Room' had wandered around in Mumbai for more than two years. 'How can you get a job within a couple of months of your arrival? Look at the state we are in! Shouldn't you stay on for at least a year?' they preached. He hadn't guessed that he had to carry on idling around offices and begging for jobs for such a long time. He shouldn't join the unemployed gang! He had, at that time, money enough to leave the place. He was worried that even that money might get spent.

He thought for a long time and started back to his lodgings. On the way, an advertisement caught his attention. It said that there would be an art exhibition in the city during the following week. He was under the spell of the Mysore Dasara Exhibition for a long time, he remembered. He made up his mind that he would leave Mumbai only after the exhibition. He was the very embodiment of patience for a

whole week. He waited eagerly for the first of April, the day the exhibition would open. How could it not arrive? On that day, Rama came to the gallery. The paintings were on show at the Town Hall. He reached the place at twelve in the afternoon and stayed there till the evening. Although he was aware that his funds were limited, he came there on the following three days. He wondered why he had given up the craze he had for painting when he was young. On his way back, he decided that he would return to it. Should he join an art school? Should he study for a couple of years more? He didn't have the facilities to do so. Nor did he have the patience.

Nursing his illusion, he entered and exited the houses of all the prosperous people in Matunga. He was fed up with begging for jobs in the city. He would find out where rich people lived and knock on their doors. If the doors opened, he would ask if they needed a music teacher. That became his routine. It wasn't clear if anyone else had done such a thing. But his efforts over a week weren't futile. Someone asked him to come on a Sunday morning so that they could listen to him singing and playing the violin. So, he had to meet his friends so that he could borrow a violin for a day.

The Sunday arrived. To reach the house on time, he went without even having breakfast. Fortunately, the householder hadn't had breakfast either! He invited Rama and gave him a share of his tea as well. Breakfast over, it was time to 'weigh' the music teacher. It was the house of Udupi Raya from Dharwada, who had got a senior post in an insurance company and was living comfortably. He had a houseful of children. His income was good and he wanted two of his younger children to learn music. But he himself didn't know what sort of music it should be. All the children were cooing *Tumne mujhko*; and he thought that they might have an aptitude for music as they seemed to like the song. Rama held the violin and played an old song. It was one that Subraya had taught Nagaveni earlier. After that, he played a few new songs. The people in the house did not seem dissatisfied. Shanthu and Seeth*é*, the children, approved of the teacher and it was agreed that Rama should give them six lessons a week. The salary

would be twelve rupees for the time being. Rama said yes and walked to another house, one and half miles away.

There was a motor car standing outside the house. The house appeared to belong to very wealthy people. Rao Bahadur Shivananda Raya lived on the lower floor of the building. When Rama went to the door, a servant asked him for his name and went inside. Rama was shown a place in the waiting room. He thought that, if things worked out, he might get a lot of money here. Shivananda Raya came to the drawing room with a fourteen-year-old girl. Rama took out the violin and the girl said immediately, 'Appa, that is our violin, the one that Shankararaya took yesterday!' Rama felt ashamed to have become a violinist without a violin. His own had been left behind at home and it had been ages since he had touched it.

So, Shivananda Raya talked to Shankara's friend and asked him to play. Rama knew his ragas. So he played with great confidence. His mind was at peace that morning and even his hands moved easily in those beautiful surroundings. 'What would you like to earn? This girl is learning English. She has schoolwork as well. Teach her a few unusual ragas. Not the ones you played now. Two lessons a week shall do.' said Shivananda Raya. Rama smiled. 'We used to give ten rupees to the previous music teacher. But we had to stop the lessons because he was not regular.' Rama agreed to the terms.

From then on, he wandered looking for houses where he could teach music. Meanwhile, there was a need for him to buy a violin. He used the money he had in hand to buy one, and got into the business of teaching, though he had to face hardship for a few days. His longing to learn painting was quite strong. He decided to study art for a few months instead of looking for work. If he could not get a satisfactory job before December, he would go straight back home. He wrote to his mother, not knowing what she would say. 'I can't tell you not to learn painting. I am amazed that this childhood craze of yours stayed hidden inside you. But neither that nor music will give you food. Complete your stay in Mumbai soon and come back. How long can I wait for you? Let us feed on tears here together. What is the point in people like us crying for the dreams of Mumbai?' she wrote back.

Rama became a student of art. He was worried about where he could go for instruction. He was thinking of a picture he had seen at the exhibition. It would be good to learn from 'Madame Nova,' who was the artist. He brought up the matter with Shankara, who was a living directory of Mumbai roads. 'I remember seeing her studio. It should be in one of the bylanes off Hornby Road. She must be a Jew. How can you possibly pay the fees and learn from someone like her?'

Rama didn't lose heart. For two days he wandered on Hornby Road and its bylanes. After looking up at the buildings over and over again, he discovered the Nova Studio. He went straight up and knocked on the door gently. 'Yes,' the answer came. Ten minutes later, a middle-aged woman opened the door. When she asked why he was there, he told her all about his desire. 'I saw your painting, "The Song of Poverty", and was deeply impressed,' he said.

'I don't take students. Even if I do, my fees are very high. Someone else may teach you for less.'

Rama said nothing.

'You may go.'

'Will you please hear just one thing from me?'

'What?' she asked with a smile.

Rama spoke dejectedly. 'I am a lover of art. I can play the violin. If you are pleased with my service . . .' he added hesitatingly.

'Hindi music?'

'Yes.'

'Which style? I too love the music of your country. Let us hear your music.'

'I shall come again and you could listen to me play. I haven't liked the paintings from the art schools. I came here because I like your paintings.'

She didn't say anything but went straight in and brought out her own violin. 'Do play, if this will do,' she said.

Rama took the violin from her. His hands trembled, on just looking at her face. He bent his head and played, loosening the rein in his mind. For ten minutes, his rag-alapa wandered all over the corners of the studio and danced. Nova stared at his hands and face. Rama finished his playing and stood up to go. 'May I leave now?' he asked.

'You are great,' Nova said politely. 'Come here whenever you feel like it. Ask anything and I will tell you. I can teach you what I can. In return, let me have the benefit of listening to your music.'

From that day onwards, Rama became a devotee of Nova. And she became his mother. She didn't learn a single song from him but listened to him raptly as long as he played. She would then have a discussion about it.

Rama's education in art was very strange. He would walk into the studio with steps as soft as her cat's and stand in a corner till she called him. It was Nova's studio as well as home. The other person who lived there was her father. They had come to stay in Mumbai as guests after falling victim to Hitler's racism. Rama would watch her painting. He looked at her sketches and material and turn the pages of all the books she owned. If she asked him to draw what he wanted to, he would start drawing. Now and then, she would say, 'Not like that, do it like this . . .Not that colour, use this . . .' She had realised that Rama had natural talent for art.

One day, while they sat talking, Nova asked Rama about his life at home. He had felt anguished listening to the pitiable life struggle of the Jews. He thought that his own sufferings were nothing compared to the difficulties they had experienced. Because she asked, he described his mother and tried to portray her as a heroic person. As if to show his prosperity, he said, 'Our house is on the seaside. There is the sea on one side and a river on the other.' When he talked about the sea, he mentioned that Mumbai's dirty sea brought him pain. As he was talking, he picked up the violin in front of him. He remembered taking his mother to the beach and playing music all through the night. Remembering that, he played, not knowing for how long. Nova's father, who had gone out, came

in as well and sat before him. Rama became aware of him and stopped playing. 'Is your sea so beautiful!' exclaimed Nova, floating in a heaven of joy.

Once, she asked if she could call some of her friends over to listen to him. She didn't want him to say no. 'I don't know enough to perform in front of people. I have never been taught, nor do I belong to any school. Like my pictures, my music is also a kindergarten show,' he said. She laughed.

The very next Sunday, Nova invited a few European friends who too, like her, had been exiled to Mumbai. She introduced Rama to all of them. Rama had to sit yet again to play the violin before them. That day, his mind was flowing in another direction as he watched the Jews in front of him. Their grief was like a sea and agitated his mind. Inspired by it, he started playing a raga. His music enthralled the audience who had suffered in many countries before arriving in Mumbai. They must have felt that their whole life had come back. They found the music wonderful. Nova was overjoyed about her new discovery.

Months rolled on. Rama's income didn't increase by even an iota. He could not find any more houses where he could teach music, apart from the two he had before. He tried a couple of times to knock on other doors. Even the houses where he taught didn't seem all that comfortable because both Udupi Raya and Shivananda Raya were the kind of people who were particular about what their children were being taught.

Udupi Raya was a devotee of Vaishnavism. He would ask for a few songs in praise of God. Fortunately, Rama used to listen to his mother when she was learning music and had heard Subraya sing some. All that came in handy. However, he had to do his teaching of songs under such circumstances. How long would it be before his bag of music ran empty?

Shivananda Raya wanted particular ragas to be taught his daughter in two lessons a week. He might or might not be knowledgeable about music, but he knew the names of some ragas. Among them, he chose some that were rarely heard. Rama knew some of them but not the others. Moreover, he

didn't think that ragas and songs were mere ornaments of music. The development of a raga, in his view, depended on one's creativity. If it was true that he couldn't play today as he did the day before, it was because formal training was not one of his strengths. It was a situation where he would have to sit for hours, gather the notes, lay a foundation for the raga and offer the whole thing to his students, which they learnt by rote . He couldn't accept that method of teaching. But shouldn't he accept the twenty five rupees that he got?

He used to send his mother five rupees from his earnings. But his meals, clothes, paper for painting and brushes wouldn't come to him free. He was now a full-fledged member of Friends' Room. Maruthiraya's family had come back and Rama knew that there would be no place for anyone else even to sit. So, he had to spend most of his time with his friends. When he was there, Gangadhara's voice would be under lock and key. How long could he tolerate it? He took on a job as an agent for Snow face cream for a couple of months, went around Mumbai District and flaunted his income of fifty rupees a month. But, as soon as he had found enough clients and given their addresses, the company dropped him. After that, he decided that the toilet industry was a bourgeois one and there was no place for it under Communism.

Days passed. The ground heated up and welcomed the rains. Rama hadn't needed an umbrella until then. As soon as the month of July arrived, he had to make an offering of a little money to the damned rain. That meant less money to spend on himself! He gave up going for a cup of tea and gained an umbrella. Thus, everything he needed demanded some kind of sacrifice from him. But when he mixed with his friends, he would chat happily and forget the world. He wouldn't get a headache despite all that smoke from Virginia tobacco, as he had got used to it. But in the beginning, he had great difficulty in tolerating some of their habits.

'Rama, where on earth does an artist who doesn't even smoke come from?' Gangadhara would ridicule him. Perhaps Rama too might have felt thirsty for cigarettes, but what would happen if it demanded a share from his earnings? Fearing that, he kept its attraction at a distance.

The rainy season continued. So, too, developments in families. Udupi Raya said that his daughter had grown up. Moreover, he married her off because he found a suitable alliance. The music teacher got an invitation. The refreshments he was offered at the wedding were the last he got from that family. Shankara asked Rama, who came in looking depressed, why he hadn't gone to the studio that day. 'Marriage is death to music,' Rama answered. He didn't have to narrate what had happened. 'Shouldn't you look for another house?' Shankara asked.

'Unless I do, the wheels of my life won't turn,' said Rama. 'Anyway, I shall stay here until the rainy season is over or till the end of the year. I have had enough of Mumbai.'

'Are you already fed up? Are you giving up your painting lessons? This is a bourgeois city. Painters may not find it hard to make a living. If you paint the picture of a factory owner, you may get five hundred rupees. You won't have to count five or ten rupee notes like we do.'

'I am not leaving because of that. I may not get my meals from painting. Even the mistress of the studio is not all that well off. She is really talented. This city wants cheap art. It is enough if someone can smear some paint on a photograph and sell it for a few rupees. Art is something else in an exhibition. If a Maharaja buys one picture for five hundred rupees, will that be enough? What about the other paintings?'

Gangadhara was a hedonist. 'It has to be a nude picture for a Maharaja to buy. It is only then that they become art lovers.'

'Well you may be right. Anyway, I have had enough of Mumbai. I can as well stay at home instead of starving here. Is it in any way more dignified to starve wearing boots and shoes?'

'Rama, you don't know. We were born some twenty five years too late. People of the previous generation who came here with a pass in Matric are now earning six hundred, eight hundred and even a thousand rupees. What happens to the new arrivals is totally different.'

'It is only the cinema art that rates high here,' said Gangadhara. 'But, within a few years, Bolshevism will arrive here as well. These directors and stars will all bite the dust. Shankar, I want to take up journalism. I want to produce a film journal and pulverise the Mumbai stars.'

'Why should you start a journal yourself? Aren't there many magazines in Mumbai? If you attack the cinema culture with keen criticism, they may publish your writing.'

'Oh, Rama, you are a baby! Do you know the length of my service in journalism? I sent my articles to all magazines and papers. The reward was a waste paper basket! If they print such criticism, will they get advertisements from cinema houses the next day?'

Rama had had enough of the civilised world. He kept smiling but couldn't believe that the golden era of Socialism would arrive within the blinking of an eye. His brand of Socialism was alive in his Hangarakatté Congress office. It was now alive in the Friends' Room. But, he didn't think that the wind of Socialism was strong enough to venture out.

During the rainy season, Nagaveni's letters arrived one after another. 'Come home. Won't you at least get a teacher's job here? Won't a person who has completed his B.A. not get even fifteen rupees? Let's be happy here. By staying in a strange city among rich people and starving, won't you end up having more pain than pleasure? Here, we can experience our poverty under cover, at least.'

Rama had lost a tuition house. It was very difficult to find another. He often thought about Shivananda Raya's daughter getting married. He thought that his life in Mumbai would come to an end by Christmas and that he should learn as much as possible about the art of painting. Within that time, he had to provide himself with enough money to return home with. If possible, he should earn more so that he could stay with his mother for a few days without any worries. But he knew that it was only a dream.

In the midst of such a difficult life, a letter came from his mother and made him happy. She had written a long letter,

the main content of which was the disaster the rains had brought. The roof of the room where they had kept their Gods had collapsed. Just as she was thinking of tiling the house and the God's room which had been built by elders, the roof had kept leaking, the walls had become damp and then collapsed.

The very next morning after the letter arrived, another came. She used to write once in a fortnight and he was surprised at her having written within three days. It was not like the previous letter. He had received joyful news totally beyond his imagination. As his mother herself was pulling out the mud from the wall with a hoe, she had found a small box buried in the wall. Bachchi's words had come true that day.

There were thirty gold sovereigns of the time of the Queen in the box. 'This was no one else's doing but my father-in-law's,' she had written. 'Why are you suffering there even now? Let's buy some land on lease, sow, reap and spend our time.'

Never had Rama roamed around the kingdom of dreams as he did that day. That night, he dreamt that he had not only broken down the room for Gods, but also the whole storeyed house with all its walls, and found hundreds of boxes and pots. They had become lakhiers and he too was moving around in a car in Mumbai's Marina. Someone had appeared before the car. If he hadn't, who knows how many more delectable dreams Rama might have had. His car had stopped. It was morning as well. Gangadhara was getting up from bed, singing, '*Jadoo ha! Jadoo ha....*!'

Rama felt greatly ashamed. He wondered if his mother's letter of the day before was real or not. He put his hand into his pocket, pulled the letter out, read it again and made sure it was real. He was overjoyed and told his friends that he would take them out for refreshments on Sunday. He had to borrow money for that. Nevertheless, he made his Communist friends happy.

From the next day onwards, one leg pulled him to the studio while the other one pulled him towards Kodi. One eye wanted to see Mother Nova and the other longed to see his

mother at home. One day, he spoke with great difficulty to Nova. 'I shall be here only for one more month. I am going to my mother after that. It has been long since I saw her.'

'You will come back to Bombay, won't you? You are greatly interested in painting. You may not earn money from it but your mind will have contentment.'

'That's why I am going back home. My mother and my sea — they will give me contentment. I also have the art that you taught me. I shall practise it there,' he said.

He did go to see Nova as many times as possible until Christmas time. He sat there for hours and drew. More than that, he spent time watching her glide her brush and choose subjects to draw. 'Aren't you mad about the sea? I haven't seen you draw it at all,' he asked her before he left.

'We belong to the interior. We were born and brought up beside hills and plains. Now the sea is near us. Where was it then?'

'The sea here is not the sea at home. It has been my lullaby since childhood. We can hear all its ragas from our house. Looking at this peaceful sea, it appears as if the sea has lost something. It appears as if this sea has no soul whereas our sea has one.'

'Will you send a picture of the sea there to remember you by?'

'That's what I want to do.'

'Ramu, what is the matter with your country? Should the people here continue to live in frustration because of poverty?'

'What happened in your country? Instead of poverty, racism turned into a devil for you.'

'That's true. Otherwise, why did we have to come to Mumbai? Would I be here dreaming of those hills and plains? No other country can take on the beauty of a place where one was born.'

'That is what I too feel.'

The ship 'Netravathi' stood at the Princess Dock filled with the Christmas crowd. The occupants of Friends' Room had come to say farewell to Rama. Shankara held his hand. 'I shall write to you, should something come up. One needn't lose hope.'

'Ramu, you went to Nova's Studio instead of going to the cinema studio. It was your mistake,' said Gangadhara.

Rama smiled and sent a signal with his eyes. Nova had arrived there. She gave him a rolled up picture she had brought with her. 'This is the hill behind my home,' she said with a laugh. The steamer hooted. Rama was tearful, looking at Nova. He thought she must longing for her country, having had to run away from there.

~30~

The morning dew lay lightly on the plains by the beach. The winter wind at the time of Makara Sankranthi blew strongly. It was a wind that made lips tremble. The sun rose even while the silver moon was still visible in the sky. All the birds in Aithala's fence woke up chirping. Nagaveni, who was lying down in the verandah with a cloth for cover, woke up. 'Rama, the sun has risen. Shouldn't you water the tobacco?' she asked aloud so that she could wake him up. 'What happened?' asked Rama as he woke up eventually. Both of them went to the beach in the west. Dew lay everywhere in the extreme west, the sea had half disappeared, and only the roar could be heard. They went down the beach and came to the newly made seedbed. There

was a fenced tobacco backyard and a tank there. Rama and Nagaveni got into the water, filled the pots and started watering the tobacco plants. As they worked on, the cold which made their bodies shiver took leave of them, and they felt a lot warmer. Rama tied his dhoti around his head as his grandfather used to. By the time watering was over, the sun was chopping away the surrounding layers of cloud. The dew dripped down from the tips of tobacco leaves. Nagaveni who had finished watering in another corner of the backyard asked if she could pull out some greens.

'Is that going to be served again?' Rama asked.

'What else is there? There is fresh cucumber which can be cut up and spiced with mustard.'

'No. Why should the young cucumbers be pulled out?'

Nagaveni pulled out some greens. 'I am going home. You? Come, bathe and eat.'

'Amma, I have no school to attend. Isn't it Sunday? I shall go to the sea. My picture is half-done. When do I finish it and send it to Mumbai? Three years have passed since I came here.'

So, Rama rushed to the beach. He was like a horse galloping on the sand. When he reached the shore, he sat down suddenly. Crouching in the spray and the wind, he started counting the waves. The sun, clipping the dew and kissing the waves, would once turn the surf into orange, gold a little later, and then golden green at other times, tickling them into laughter. Every burst of laughter and colour drew a picture in Rama's mind. His fingers held a stick and scribbled on the ground.

He must have sat there till the sun became hot and his back burnt. Then, Mogera Chenna came that way, holding a short hoe. 'Master, no school today?' he asked his village teacher, the meshtru.

'It's only the fishing nets that are working. It's holiday for school.'

'Meshtré, it's has been a month since the nets got any catch. No Baigé fish have been caught. Each year is different from another.'

'Chenna, should you catch only Baigé? You can catch Pig fish.'

'If one eats that fish, one may die, Ayya. Let it be. How is my son in his studies? He neither writes nor reads at home. It is enough if he learns how to sign his name. See how I am suffering because I am not able to read or write!'

'Maybe it's better if you can't read or write at all. My father knew both and that's why my grandfather's property went to the Udupi sahukara.'

'Are you buying it back?'

'If they are prepared to sell and if we have enough money.'

'God will look after you. Don't worry. This year, your tobacco looks good. I saw your backyard. How is the fish manure that I brought you? Good?'

'Chenna, if the manure itself you brought is so good, I wonder what it will be like if you yourself turn into manure and we use it!'

'The teacher is too full of praise. The violin that you play at home — can I play it as well as you, if I learn how to play?'

'People like you can play even without learning. You teach me how to cast the net and I shall teach you how to play the violin.'

'Making people laugh comes naturally to the master!'

While all that banter was going on, Bachchi came there limping. 'Bachchi, why have you come here in your motor car? Did you apply the medicine I brought on your feet?'

'Ayya, they say that until the poison goes, the foot will not get better. You have brought me medicine to use on the outside.'

'Chenna, I want to get Bachchi's husband another job. Like you going on to play the violin, he can become a doctor in a hospital!'

He laughed as he said it. Bachchi had slipped and sprained her foot. He had gone to the hospital and brought her the medicine. He teased her saying that she just talked without using it. Chenna said, 'You woman, when he goes so far and gets you the medicine, you refuse to apply it on your feet, like a dog! It is because these Mogera folk are getting swollen-headed. That's why the Baigé fish doesn't come anymore to the sea.'

'Chenna, may be worms attacked our greens for the same reason,' said Rama.

Channa laughed. 'Ayya, Amma wanted you to come home. Mandarthi Atté has arrived with her children.'

'Who? Subbatté?'

'Ayya, I am a poor woman. Don't get angry thinking that I am teasing you. The children have arrived with your Atté. There is no rule saying that you shouldn't marry your aunt's child. They too won't have to look for another alliance. Shouldn't you too get married? How long do you think you can make the old lady at home tire herself, cooking?'

'Yes, Bachchi. I had the same idea and sent word to Subbatté. We need a girl at home to do the cooking and we shall pay her three rupees a month.'

'Really? Are those who have come, cooks? Three rupees a month! That much salary!'

'That's the only payment. I have told her to go to the Udupi Matha everyday and have her free meals there.'

'Ayya is still behaving like a child! Even after so many years!'

Rama got up and started running home. 'Bachchi, let your motor car travel slowly, I will go.' he cried. Subbatté was waiting to welcome him, 'Oh, Atté,' he called from the door itself. 'Rama, you have become swollen-headed! It has been

three years since you came home, but you haven't visited us even once. I myself had to come here. All the children made a fuss, wanting to come, and so I brought them all. We can see the Saligrama Chariot procession as well.'

Three of Subbi's children had come with her. Two of the elder children had stayed at home. The ones who came were Parvathi, who was married, ten-year-old Janaki, not married yet, and her young brother, Ramakrishna. 'Oh, my wife has come, Bachchi told me! Janaki has come, a girl, not a wife, has come so I can take her to school in my pocket.'

'Everything is a game for you. Just fun! Isn't it enough that your mother has stayed at home and got exhausted, cooking? Marry soon and lessen her travails.' Subbatté advised him. 'That's why I came. Our Janaki is anyway too young for you.'

'What does it matter? She can cook. Isn't that the most important reason for having a wife?'

When will you cease this kind of idle talk? Rama, is this what you teach your children at school?'

'What else, Subbatté? Why else do you think people say that boys in Kodi spend their time in such talk? It is Rama's influence, you see!'

Meanwhile, Rama's mother arrived. 'Amma, has Subbatté had something to drink?' Rama asked.

'No, I am boiling green gram. They are from Mandarthi.'

'Yes, coffee is still too hot for people here.'

'You are a fool! Don't tell me you have brought home some coffee seeds.'

'Do we need seeds for it? Can't we make Gandhi coffee?'

As there was no school, he chatted on as if he did not know the value of time. His mother had finished cooking and came out to ask whether no one wanted to eat. Subbatté hadn't bathed yet. Nor had Rama. After Nagaveni came and scolded them, they both went to the tank. Everybody had a

meal of harivé palya. Nothing special was cooked for the guests. What was special was the words they shared.

The afternoon meal was over and Nagaveni sat down to talk to Subbatté at leisure. 'Atté, you must stay for three days,' said Rama. 'I must go to Udupi. I should be back before midnight. If not, I will be here before dawn to water the backyard.' His mother advised him to take people from Padumunnooru because they knew the Sahukara very well. Rama said yes and walked along the beach to Padumunnooru first, and then to Udupi. After he left, Nagaveni sat talking about the joys and sorrows of their household. Rama's return home, finding some money when the wall collapsed, Rama taking to farming after coming back and working in a private school for ten rupees a month. She told Subbi everything in detail. 'It is not a permanent job, however. They say that Rama needs training. Rama doesn't think of doing all that. If those people agree to sell off the permanent lease, he says that teaching can go on for as long as possible. He could give it up later.'

'How much money do you need to give them?'

'Padumunnooru people have told them of our problems and said that they would try to get the land around the house for one thousand and five hundred rupees. Even then, we don't have that much money. The tobacco crop is very good this year. If the rates remain high this year, we can somehow keep our dignity. I went against my father-in-law's wishes. If we get the property back, I will have atoned for it. We can live with no obligation to anyone.'

Subbatté said to herself that she would take a vow to offer something to God if her father's land came back to the family. It would have been good if Poojari's field could also come back. But don't they need money for that, she asked herself. If they cultivate their land themselves, the rice to be given for the lease at least could be saved. Wouldn't they get thirty or forty measures for their own use?

'How can that be enough? He has planted cashew on the beach at the back. On the three acre hill, only cashew

trees have come up. The fruits may ripen within two years. There are three acres of Gaali trees. They are no problem. But carrying water is difficult. Do you know how tobacco drinks up water? Watering cannot be missed for a single day, but nothing else gives as much profit as it does.'

'Can you manage to carry water?'

'I may not be able to work as hard as Doddatté but I can do that much at least. Otherwise, how can I spend time at home after cooking for just the two of us?' said Nagaveni.

Subbatté spent the night describing once again her days with her father. She talked about her mother, Sarasothi and Parothi sweating it out in the field. 'Our Mandarthi is the same. There is some work or the other all through the day. Because we work hard, we are managing to spend days without borrowing money.'

One thing led to another. After a long time, Subbatté said, 'Nagaveni, is Rama twenty-four years old or even older? Don't you want him to marry yet? Wouldn't someone good give him a bride?'

'Attigé, I can't talk to him about it. If I do, I know what he will say. "Amma, should we give the food we eat to yet another human being? What happens to the children who will be born tomorrow?" he is sure to ask.'

'You are really something! You set your sails whichever the way the wind blows. Why should he be alone? Is he a sage in meditation or what? Aren't there poor people here with families? Are things like poverty and riches in our control? Nevertheless, should one not do the right things at the right age?'

'I can't say anything to him. If our property comes back, I would definitely want a daughter-in-law. Whatever happens, I don't think I will have to face the miseries I had to. It is true that there is poverty but I feel that we can somehow live with dignity. But I am not brave enough to tell that to Rama.'

'I have come here to advise Rama. If he is agreeable, we have a girl in our family and we can have her married to him.

They are from Brahmavara. There is no problem whatsoever. They have just two daughters. They grow around two hundred measures of grain. The first girl is married. The second one is sixteen years old. Why not? She has studied a little in her own town. You must also talk to him. Our family is close to theirs and the two are related. If the horoscopes match and he agrees, it is as good as done. I have given them his horoscope. They say the horoscopes match well.'

'I am tempted, too, as I listen to you. But it is difficult to change Rama's mind. It will be fine if he continues to be a teacher. Ten rupees a month is not too little for this place. But the job won't last long. Rama says he has studied enough.'

They kept talking for a very long time in the night. It was Rama who woke them up from sleep. He had left Padumunnooru at night itself and had arrived at daybreak to say 'Amma.' That morning, Subbatté, her elder daughter and Nagaveni watered the tobacco field though they had been told not to. The mud pot broke into pieces in their hurry to finish the job. In between the watering, Rama told his mother how Padumunnooru grandfather helped him in getting the Udupi job done. 'But the people there wouldn't consider anything less than one thousand five hundred rupees. But it was not just that area that they agreed to part with. They will also throw in the field that produces three and a half measures, the site, the beach around it, and also the six acres which are right beside Upadhyaya's field.'

'The area is of course large. But what does it contain? Not even a few wild flower plants!'

'There is nothing there at the moment. But if we plant a cashew grove now, won't we get twenty-five measures of cashew nuts in five years' time? Is it going to be that expensive? It is enough if we put a fence around it. Paddy doesn't command rates that cashewnuts do now,' Rama explained to his mother.

Watering was over. Rama was completely preoccupied with the question of the two hundred rupees he needed to seal the deal. If tobacco commanded good rates, he might get one hundred and fifty rupees more. He finally decided that he

shouldn't enter any more money deals with rich people but should take a loan from Madhava and save the household.

Rama chatted very cheerfully with Subbatté. But she could not muster enough courage to broach the subject of his marriage. Before leaving for home, she said, 'Rama, I will come next month. I will tell you everything when I come back. Let your property transaction be all over by then.'

The others in the village took the sickle to their tobacco field. Rama thought of doing the same and constructed a trellis in the courtyard to hang the tobacco. Just the two of them, mother and son, worked at it in the evening when Rama's school was over. The day after the work was done, they brought tobacco bundles and hung them up along the frame to dry. The leaves were better than the previous year's. Rama thought that the seeds he had chosen that year had yielded a good crop. If Mogera Chenna heard him say that, he would claim that it was because of the greatness of his fish manure.

Meanwhile, Ahmed Byari, the tobacco merchant of the village, came to see the tobacco they had hung up. 'Meshtré, give me the whole lot. No need to weigh or anything. Just state the price on a rough estimate. What discount will you give?' he asked. The rates had gone up a little and that was why Byari was so enthusiastic. Rama smiled. 'Byarigalé, the entire lot can be given. What is your offer for it?'

'One hundred and fifty,' Byari said. He could weigh the tobacco by looking at the trellis. If he offered that much, it could be worth more, Rama thought. So, he asked for two hundred and fifty rupees. Byari just left the place and Rama started feeling that it wouldn't have mattered even if it was only one hundred and fifty. He shouldn't have let the client go. In the evening, Byari sent someone to find out if Rama was ready to give the lot for two hundred rupees and Rama said yes.

Since the rate was going up day by day, Byari brought the money the next day and left it with Rama. After a week, he came and weighed the tobacco. He felt relieved to discover that he hadn't been mistaken in estimating the weight. But

Nagaveni did feel that they might have got two hundred and fifty rupees. 'Amma, it went for two hundred because the rates were going up. Otherwise, the fair price would have been only a hundred and fifty. Didn't we get only that much last year?' Rama said, consoling his mother.

Within a week of getting the money, Ramaraya became the rightful owner of a piece of Rama Aithala's household property. Nagaveni's joy was beyond description on the day the property was registered in their name again. Twenty years ago, Lachcha had told her that he would take her to Udupi but had taken her to Brahmavara instead and had had her property transferred to his own name. Within a month, the property had been lost to them. But for Narayanappa's help, they wouldn't have got it on permanent lease either. Now, they were overjoyed that they had regained their bond with the soil.

Rama's mother thought that she should bring up matrimonial matters when he was so full of zest. She had waited for a long time for the right moment. Now the property was in their hands and they didn't have to ask anyone for a loan, thanks to Byari's wholesale deal.

But did Rama have leisure, though watering the tobacco patch was over? He had nothing to grow, after the tobacco crop. But his mother had the idea of developing a vegetable patch near the beach. 'Amma, no need for vegetables this year. Let's grow some greens in the yard and be done with it.'

'No green vegetables? Won't you get bored eating bland saaru and rice everyday?

'That's not it. Our new land on the beach is at least eight acres. I am wondering why we shouldn't cultivate it before the rainy season and get a few measures of grain.'

'How can paddy grow in the sand? Have you given up your precious plan to grow cashew?'

'Amma, it will be enough if we plant paddy in the fields we have. I want to grow another acre of tobacco even if it means employing a couple of people. Instead of getting exhausted planting paddy, we can work towards that. The rest

of the land is mostly sand and there we can plant Gaali or cashew seedlings which may grow well.'

Rama spent his salary for the next three months on sand. He began flattening the sand bank. He didn't hesitate to carry the sand himself as he was determined to flatten the area to prepare it before the rains started. But working with sand in the hot sun wasn't easy. Worried that, when it rained, the sand would weigh twice as much, he employed two men. He wandered in the sun and his complexion turned dark .

In the evening and in the moonlight, Rama would be stationed by the new field. By the time it was half prepared, he sent for Chenna. 'Chenna, let us teach your son proper English. Put a hundred baskets of fish manure here. I want to grow tobacco here as well this year.'

'Ayya, meshtré! Even after learning English, you are digging here in the sand. Why does my boy need any English? We, Mogera children, always speak only in English in the evening!'

'With the dark-coloured bottle, I bet. Isn't that so, Chenna? If you Mogera gave up drinking, would you have any less to eat?'

'Hmm ... Has Ayya forgotten the Gandhi lecture he once gave? Didn't all of us give up drinking that day?'

'Yes, instead of drinking from bottles, you started drinking from pots. That was all the effect that my Gandhi lecture had.'

'In that case, let me tell you. Without toddy our lives would dry up. Even your buffalo's milk does not have its strength. But this year, the net business was next to nothing. There was neither toddy nor liquor. We have taken a vow in the name of Arama God that we will perform a play if we get a good catch of fish this year. We should be casting the net after the new moon. There is nothing to do now. The only job we have is to keep on pulling the net in. There are not even ten baskets of fish in one net, Ayya. We have fish one year and nothing the next year. Where do they all go?'

'Into your stomach!'

'Ayya is always making fun,' said Chenna and left. The sun went down and the sky reddened. Rama went to the sea to watch the sunset.

He had drawn pictures of the sea when he was free and collected them for Nova. He would think of sending them to her as he drew. But, after finishing the picture, he would say it was like a scribble. After praising the sea so much, if he sent her pictures like the ones he had drawn, she might laugh. He would think that the canvas was too small to portray the enormity of the sea and hesitate to dispatch the pictures.

* * *

Subbatté who had said that she would come the month after, didn't arrive for two months. Eventually, one evening on Yugadi Padya, she came there, tired and saying 'Hari, Hari'. Rama and Nagaveni were not at home then. Bachchi, who was sweeping up honné leaves and pods for fuel, said that they were at the spot where seedbeds were being laid. She rushed over there. Both mother and son were sitting beside the empty baskets that the labourers had left behind. Rama's body was covered in sand. Subbatté was surprised when she saw them and smiled. 'Nagaveni, I think you and Rama are possessed by the spirit of Parothi. Summer and winter were both the same to her. It's like that for you too.'

'Subbatté, so you have arrived. You should have come next month. In your place, even if people sit twirling their moustaches, rice will arrive at the house. This is accursed Kodi. However much you sweat, it is not enough.'

'Yes, your Subbatté's people lease out their fields, sit at the main entrance and eat. They have a profit of ten or twenty measures. The Gurikara people are liars but we are truthful.'

Rama stood up. Nagaveni carried the baskets needed for work. Subbatté snatched them from her. 'Att*é*, come. Let's look at the sea,' said Rama.

'How crazy Rama is about the sea! Can't we see it tomorrow? The water will not dry up during the night. Can't

we come back after bathing? Should we go there looking like this?'

'You are right, Atté. I didn't remember what I look like. The only thought in my head was what if the sea dried up by tomorrow. It won't really dry up, will it?'

'I will tell it to give Rama some salt water if he gets thirsty.'

They laughed as they turned their backs on the reddened sky and returned home. As they disappeared among the trees by the beach, the sun also disappeared.

What did Subbatté, who had arrived that night, have to do? Rama always brought the conversation around to her village for fun. Subbatté too gave replies with her rustic wit. Conversation meandered everywhere and eventually turned to the open air plays in Mandarthi. 'Atté, who will take the second lead this year in your troupe? Who will paint and decorate them? We haven't had a single play here. Our Mogera Chenna says that if they get a worthwhile catch, they might enact a play before Arama God in whose name they have taken a vow.'

Subbatté wasn't interested in any conversation about plays. She was concerned about the marriage of Brahmavara Nagappayya's daughter. She wanted to raise the topic of Rama's marriage somehow or the other, but Rama changed the topic very cleverly like playing a game of pagadé while facing an opponent. He hadn't stopped talking even at midnight and there hadn't been even a distant mention of his marriage.

As soon as they woke up the next morning, there was the flurry of watering the harivé and brinjal patches. Immediately after that, it was going to the seedbed and telling the workers to carry enough sand to finish the work on the bank. After coming back from there, it was bathing and running off to the Kodi school to teach. After Rama left for school, Subbatté said, 'Nagaveni, how long can I wait for you to talk to him? You alone must tell him that you are being pressured and that you have told them to wait. Anyone would say yes to

a girl who owns fields that yield a hundred measures of grain. If he says no, aren't there a hundred other boys ready for marriage around here?' Could Nagaveni ever consider produce of a hundred measures small? But wouldn't that come to the daughters only after Nagappayya's death? However, the alliance would have helped them in their poverty. But Rama had to agree to see the girl. He should like her. Perhaps he could say yes considering that he had got back the house and property. If he didn't really want to get married, would he have fought so hard for the house and the property? Was all that effort meant only to provide her with some luxury? That was how Nagaveni felt. But Subbatté did not deserve an answer like that. Therefore she thought she would persuade her son to agree, and decided to bide her time.

Evening fell. The schoolchildren carried their bags and went home. Rama went to the seedbed without going home. How much mud had been carried? How far had the fencing progressed? Should manure be brought there before the rainy season? Should fish manure be used? A hundred questions jostled in his mind. Subbatté was pestering Nagaveni. 'It looks as if he is going to marry the field itself!' she teased.

The evening's work was over. If work went on like that, two acres would be ready and that would be enough for the year. Was it enough to get the field ready? Shouldn't it be filled with manure? With such thoughts in mind, Rama came home. His mother came towards him with a broom in her hand. He asked her where she was going. She said she was going to sweep the dry leaves in the Gali grove and pile them up.

'Where is Subbatté?'

'She is cooking tonight.'

'In that case, Amma, let us go to the sea. It has been quite a few days. Amidst all the hurry in getting the field dug up, it wasn't possible to sit happily by the sea. Come, let's go.'

Both of them went towards the sea. It was going to get dark soon. There were so many birds flying around that the

sky was black. The sound of the sea birds, the noise of the crows, the 'keem, keem' of the hawks, were everywhere. 'It's a lucky day for our Mogeras,' Rama commented.

'Why do you say that?'

'Can't you see over there? A lot of fish must have been netted. Otherwise, you don't have so many sea gulls, crows and hawks together . . . Chenna's future is fine now. He was saying that the new moon day should pass. Isn't this the third day after new moon?'

They hurried to the seashore. At a distance, people with the net were making a lot of noise, like those who pull the chariot at the Koteshwara festival. The catch was outstanding that day. There was more fish than they could manage to pull in, more than they could grab. They both retraced their steps. Nagaveni was suddenly disgusted at the thought of watching the fish. Rama went to the place where they were working. The whole of Kodi was there. They had piled up their endless plunder into a hill. They had not had a catch that year. Everyone felt assured that it would sell for more than five or six hundred rupees.

Rama saw the excitement of the Mogera folk and came back to his mother. 'Amma, can a similar thing happen with our cultivation? There is always a limit to it. At the most, we can produce thirty measures instead of twenty-five. Can the number ever go from twenty to two hundred, as it does when netting fish?'

'Rama, a fishing net is like the ebb and tide of the sea.'

'We could see a Mandarthi play . . .'

'Holding your nose amidst the smell of toddy.'

'That's right. They drink when they have money in their hands. Pots and pots.'

'Leave the net be. Don't you want to know why Subbatté is here?'

'She should say.'

'Really? She has come to ask you about your marriage. There is a daughter of Brahmavara Nagappayya. She has passed class eight. It is said that they are well off. They must have shown her horoscope.'

'Amma, does their daughter know how to water tobacco and harivé? asked Rama, smiling.

'Rama, what did I know when I came here? I came here from my father's house. Wasn't I wallowing comfortably in Mangalore?'

'Exactly. There is no need to bring someone who is relaxing comfortably somewhere and make her get scorched, here on the beach. Isn't it enough that we get scorched?'

'Can you just live on like this? How can man live without the comfort of knowing that he has someone close to him?

'Hmm . . Man does live, doesn't he? He shall live whether someone is close to him or not.'

'What shall I tell her?'

'Say nothing. Tell her that I shall visit Mandarthi some day and talk to her about it.'

'What can you say? What is it that you cannot say now?'

'Perhaps you too will come to know then. Right now, even I don't know.'

Both went home by the time the moon went down. Subbatté had finished cooking and was tired, waiting for them for a long time. Nagaveni told her what her son had said. While Rama was eating, Subbatté said, 'Rama, tell me when you will be coming to our house. Tell me the truth.'

'I shall come some time.'

'No, it can't be just some time. Should I not send them an answer? Shouldn't I tell Nagappayya something or the other? It is the season for weddings. He is also in a hurry because his daughter has grown up.'

'I have told you that I will come,' said Rama, bringing everything to an end with mere words.

Subbatté was very vexed and disappointed. 'Why does the fool behave like this? Though he is trying hard to set up a house, shouldn't he realise that after his time, there must be someone to light a lamp in that house?' she thought as she left for home. She felt neither hopeful nor hopeless.

The night of the full moon arrived. The sand on the beach turned into live coal, with the intense heat. The ground cracked with the heat. Those who had sowed waited for the rain. One evening, Rama went to the beach after inspecting his new fields. He saw clouds rolling into the sky right before his eyes. All at once, day turned into night. A strong wind blew, and with the wind, drops exploded over a hundred yards and kissed the seashore in the east. It started raining and Rama hadn't brought his umbrella. So he ran from there in the rain. He stood in a grove of palm trees and kept looking up all the time, fearing falling palm fronds.

However, the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Within half an hour, it had rained as if the sea itself had spilled over. The flat area in front had turned into a lake and the water in it reflected the clouds and the palm trees upside down. While the peaceful game of reflections went on there, beyond it the western sea appeared to be rolling about, laughing at its own rage. Rama kept looking from one to the other, from the peace in front to the wrath of the sea. He said nothing the whole night. The sea in the evening and the still water danced before his eyes. The next morning, he took a piece of paper and was drawing the dream he had the evening before. Four demon-like palm trees had cut across the earth and sky. At the foot, there was a broad sheet of water reflecting the laughing clouds. Beyond that, the seashore, waves rising fiercely, laughing in madness. Far, far at the back, the sun's sport turning the sky into a dwelling of golden light. His brush-play went on till his mother called him in for dinner. Nagaveni stood captivated by her son's work.

His work was over. 'Amma, is food ready? What's the time now?' he asked. It was quite late and Nagaveni told him

to bathe and served him rice. The meal he had after his bath was like a meal in a dream. As he was eating, he told his mother, 'Amma, I have finished my picture today. Now it must be sent off to the lady in Mumbai.'

After eating, he tied a dhoti around his waist and put on a shirt and said, 'Amma, I shall wander around for a couple of days.'

'Are you going to Mandarthi?'

'Wherever. The summer holidays have started from today. Shall I go? But I may come back today itself.'

She knew the confusion in his mind. 'Yes, go,' she said.

Rama took the path of Kodi estuary straightaway. He went to Padumunnooru from there. The Shanubhog extended him warm hospitality. 'More later. I have some work. Will you come with me to Brahmavara?'

'Is it registration? What property have you bought?'

'I shall tell you on the way,' he replied.

The Shanubhog got up. They went talking to Brahmavara Nagappayya's house. His daughter Saraswathi who was sweeping the courtyard came into view as soon as they entered the house. As soon as she saw them, she stopped sweeping and moved aside. The Shanubhog asked, 'Is Appayya at home?' 'Yes. He must be in the verandah,' the girl said. The Shanubhog was an old acquaintance of Nagappayya. 'Ashi! Shanubhog on his rare visit! Why have you left your village and come here?' he asked with amusement. He saw Rama, and not knowing who he was, he asked, `Who is this? Where are you going? Shall I get you something to drink?' The Shanubhog spoke in a lighthearted way in return. 'Nagappayya, say a number, any number,' he said.

'Five,' said Nagappayya.

'If it is five, then the job is done.'

'What game is this?'

'Nagappayya, this is our own Kodi Rama, Rama Aithala's grandson. In a way, he is my grandson.'

'Oh, is that so? Please come. Do sit down,' he said, spreading a mat in a hurry.

'Let's reach a settlement right here. Rama, this is an old friend of mine. This is the house your Subbatté talked about. The one we saw outside is the girl. The wedding date is the only thing that needs to be fixed.'

Nagappayya felt as if the sky had fallen on him. He went in and told his wife everything. The visitors were served with happalas, sandigé and coffee. As they sat down for refreshments, Nagappa said, 'Shanubhogaré, do you know how well the horoscopes match?' Then he said, 'Saraswathi, bring coffee.' The girl was used to it and brought them coffee. But her clothes were different! She was wearing something with silver on it and with a gold border, and she had her hair done. She kept her head lowered as she placed the coffee in front of them.

Rama smiled. 'What she was wearing then looked better. If I had seen her in these clothes, I would have been scared!'

'When did you see her?' Nagappayya asked in surprise.

'The girl was sweeping the yard. Our Rama loves domesticity,' said the Shanubhog.

The whole day was spent there. The day of the wedding was as good as settled. When there was talk of gold and ornaments, Rama said, 'That's the one thing I know nothing about. Amma will not say anything either. She is not particular about anything. But I can say that that the wedding should be over in a day and that it should be simple.'

They spent the night there conversing for a long time.

Could the visitors be allowed to leave before they had coffee? When it was over, the Shanubhog went to Kodi. Rama went to Subbatté's house. He went there around afternoon. 'Atté, our elders have decided that a wedding will be performed between our Rama and the daughter of Brahmavara

Nagappayya. You must please come home next Monday for preparing happalas and sandigé.'

'You rascal! You have fixed your wedding, leaving me out!' she said.

The same evening, Subbatté and Rama arrived together at the house in Kodi. Subbatté's brood arrived the day after.

The next day, there was dust everywhere in the yard. The urgency of constructing the pandal! The hurried preparation of happala and sandigé! Padumunnooru's Shanubhog was sitting in a place attending to the essential things which had to be done. Rama sat cheerfully in the verandah.

Nagaveni saw Rama sitting smiling and said, 'Rama, her name and your Doddajji's name are the same!'

'Like my name and my grandfather's are the same!' Rama said smiling.

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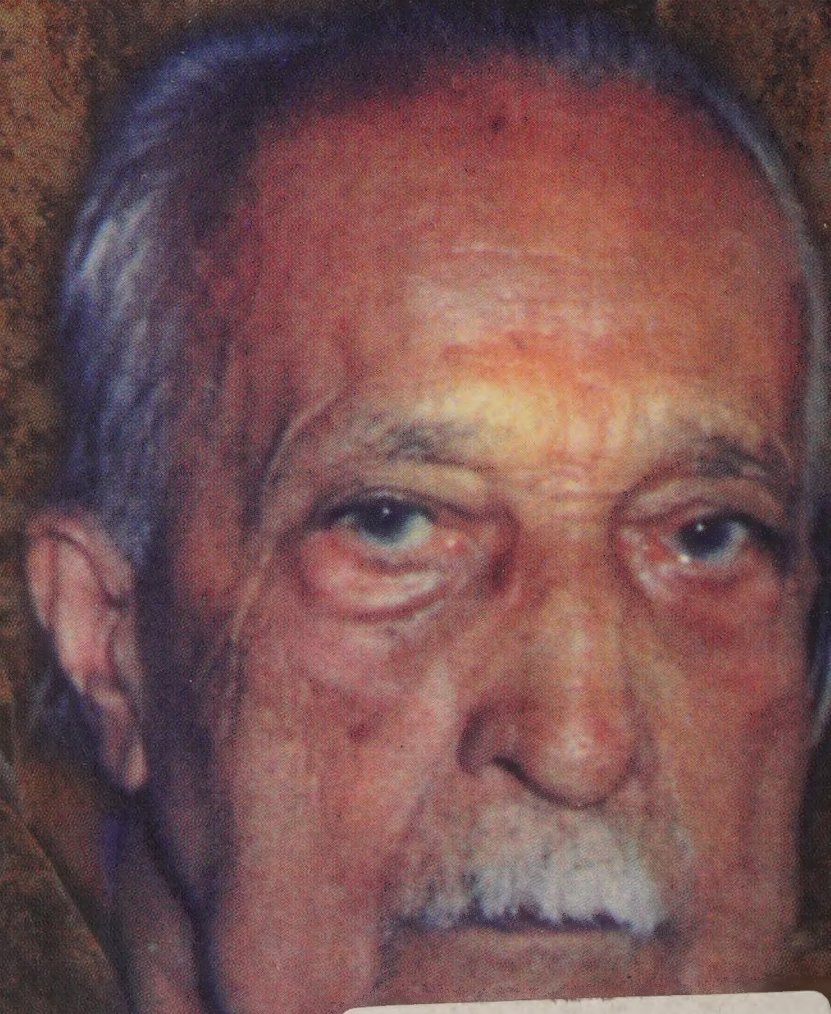
A saga spanning three generations, *Marali Mannigé* begins in mid-nineteenth century with the story of a poor brahmin family in coastal Karnataka. Winds of colonial modernity bring about sweeping changes in this tradition-bound community. The English-educated second generation loses its links with the land. Unemployment haunts the third generation which wanders to cities in search of a living. Karanth's alchemy turns this woman-centred narrative of struggle and survival into a golden classic imbued with the smells and colours of rain, earth and sea.

Padma Ramachandra Sharma (b. 1936) is a teacher and a well-known Kannada translator. She has received the Katha and Sahitya Akademi awards for her translations. Kuvempu's classic, Kambara's folk narrative and Vaidehi's stories figure prominently among her English translations.



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